空ろの箱と零のマリア3

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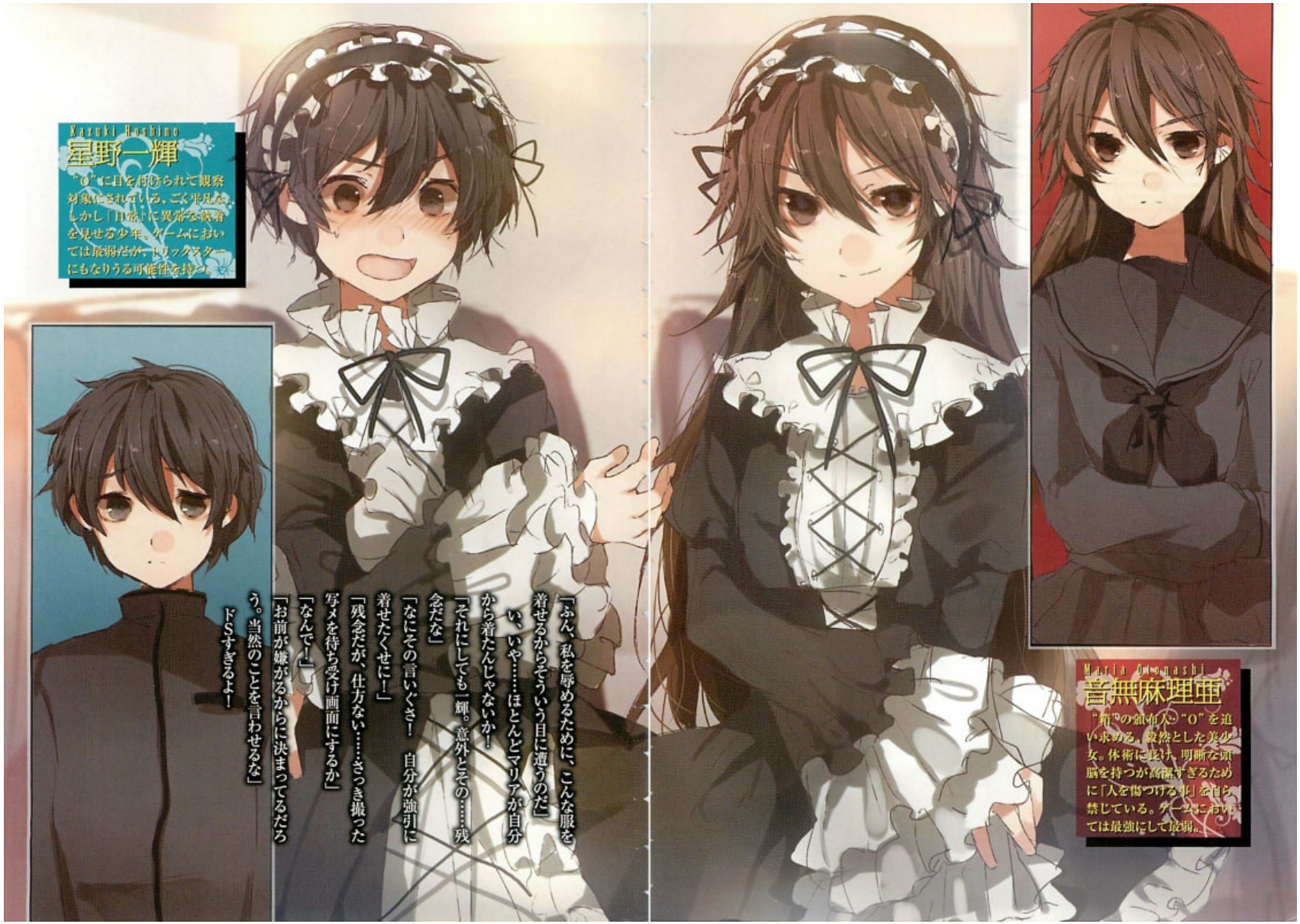
Kazuki Hoshino
星野一輝
“0”に目を付けられて観察対象にされている、ごく平凡な、しかし「日常」に異常な執着を見せる少年。ゲームにおいては最弱だが、トリックスターにもなりうる可能性を持つ。
Maria Otonashi
音無麻理亜
“前”の強制人“0”を追い求める、毅然とした美少女。体術に長け、明晰な頭脳を持つが高慢すぎるために「人を傷つける事」を自ら禁じている。ゲームにおいては最強にして最弱。
「ふん、私を辱めるために、こんな服を着せるからそういう目に遭うのだ」
い、いや……ほとんどマリアが自分から着たんじゃないか！
「それにしても一輝。意外とその……残念だな」
「なにその言いぐさ！　自分が強引に着せたくせに！」
「残念だが、仕方ない……さっき撮った写メを待ち受け画面にするか」
「なんで！」
「お前が嫌がるからに決まってるだろう。当然のことを言わせるな」
ドSすぎるよ！

「何を休み時間まで勉強してんのさ、悠里ー」
「ひゃー！　い、色葉。こ、こんにちは」
「このタイミングで挨拶かよ。質問に答えてないし」
「えと……私は色葉と違ってバカだから、努力しないと」
「クラス一位が何を卑屈な……。その発言をこっそり聞いたクラスメイトを、悠里は敵に回したよー」
「ほ、ホントに？　ご、ごめんなさい……」
「冗談にバカ正直に謝っちゃって。まったく悠里はかわいいなあ」
「……うう、バカにしてるでしょ」
Yuri Yanagi
柳 悠里
引っ込み事案で大人しい、小動物的な少女。しかし勉強にひけを取らない秀才。保護欲をかきたてるその仕草と魅力は、ゲームに於いて意外な効果を発揮する。
Iroha Shindo
新藤色葉
成績優秀で陸上部のエースであり、生徒会長をも務める少女。ゲームにおいては知力・体力において他者を凌ぐスペックを誇る。

「……」
あいつ確か、同じ中学の神内昂大……。
相変わらずいけ好かない雰囲気の奴だ。
Daiya Oniue
大嶺醍哉
銀髪にピアスを身につけた、頭の切れる皮肉屋。目的のためならば騙す事も殺すことも厭わない思い切りの良さは、ゲームにおいて抜群の切り札。
「……」
あれって確か、やばい噂で有名な大嶺センパイだよな。
意外とイケメンじゃん。ま、俺ほどじゃないけどっ！
Kyudai Kamiuchi
神内昂大
軽いお調子者のようでいてその実、多くの才能を持つ少年。ゲームにおいては軽い千妻」と秘めた「裏」とを使い分け、敵陣のゲームを抹き切る。

退屈に呑み込まれてしまった、
そんな奴には、
〝箱〟を使っても
退屈しのぎぐらいしかできない。
だから――意味のない、
殺し合いをしようぜ？
Designed by Toru Suzuki

Prologue

I’m in a scene that I can only remember in my dreams.

I wonder how many times I have met him (or her) already. …I suppose it doesn’t matter.

As always, ‘O’ was saying something bizarre, so I pretty much just ignore him (or her).

However, a single remark reverberates in my ears.

“Daiya Oomine-kun is your enemy.”

The first time I saw his silver hair, I thought, “Aah, our paths will never cross.”

I’m sure most of my other classmates got the same impression. Daiya Oomine rejected the company of others with every fiber of his being. I thought that he only assumed that oppressive attitude and rock-n-roll style to distance himself from other people.

But we got along well. Sure, Haruaki helped serve as a bridge, but that alone would never have been enough.

«Umm, you’re… Kazuki Hoshino, right? I can’t say why, but you’re kinda weird!»

This was the first thing he ever said to me.

But I believed that we were friends; after all, he always seemed happy when talking to me.

Even so, he still went there:

It’s lunchtime, and midterms are about to start tomorrow; Daiya sits down casually next to Maria and says, “You’ve dealt with ‘O’, haven’t you?”

I’m too stunned to reply, so Maria answers on my behalf. “…..Oomine, did you obtain a ‘box’?”

“What kind of rhetorical question is that? Of course I did. In the first place, I am now talking to Kazu. Be quiet, you annoying guardian.”

Maria sighs forcefully, and then looks at me, as if to suggest that she’d leave it to me.

But what should I say…?

Ignoring my silence, Daiya starts speaking.

“It always seemed odd to me. Otonashi’s appearance, your confession to Kokone and several other cases as well.”

Daiya touches the piercing in his right ear.

“These doubts were resolved when I met ‘O’. When I met him—right at that moment, I realized that he, who cannot be described as anything other than bizarre, was the reason for all those strange incidents recently. And then he told me that he was interested in Kazuki Hoshino.”

Unable to fully comprehend, I listen to him silently.

“Which means that I was not the only one who felt something was strange about you. …You know what, Kazu? After observing you for more than a year, there’s one thing I understood.”

He focuses on me with a piercing glance and continued.

“You are floating.”

“…floating?”

I couldn’t grasp the meaning of this sudden word without any context.

“It’s as if you’re watching us from an elevated vantage point. You’re here, but you refrain from getting deeply involved and you always keep a certain distance. You’re neither inside, nor outside. You’re just… floating.”

I didn’t get his point, and raised an eyebrow.

“And yet you say you want to preserve this everyday life. It was always a mystery to me why you would wish for it. But when I spoke to ‘O’—he told me that you declined the ‘box’ that granted any ‘wish’—I finally understood.”

Daiya declares with an unyielding tone.

“<u>Your goal is to trample on the ‘wishes’ of others.</u>”

“That’s not true!”

I am surprised by the volume of my own voice, but I have to make this clear.

“The reason why I’m particular about this everyday life is… because I think that longing for something is the proof of being alive… so…”

“How laughable.”

In contrast to his words, he isn’t laughing at all. He only continues cruelly,

“So do you have something you long for? Name one!”

“Of course I have. It’s—”

I stop.

I have one. I’m supposed to have one. But I can’t articulate it.

—I’m sure it’s because it hasn’t taken shape, yet.

“Because you want to keep longing for something. Hmpf, even if I admitted that claim, another question remains. Why did you become like that?”

“…Eh?”

The reason why I started being particular about this everyday life?

Come to think of it, had I always been like this? …I don’t think so. So, since when—

“____”

It occurs to me.

—Someone, veiled by a haze, that I can’t recognize.

I can’t recognize this vague appearance. Can’t recognize? …no, in fact I know who this is, no matter how much haze there is.

She is—

“Got it?”

When Daiya interrupts me, the silhouette disappears into the haze.

“…What…?”

“The fact is that, in the end, you’re just trying to preserve your everyday life reflexively, like one of Pavlov‘s dogs.”

I just want to preserve my everyday life? If so—

“This is the same as to trample others’ ‘wishes’ down. …Hey, Kazu.”

Daiya calls me with his usual leisureliness.

“I have a ‘box.’ I have become an existence that contradicts this everyday life. —So what will you do?”

I don’t know Daiya’s ‘wish.’ But if it’s one that menaces this everyday life, I will—

“You’ve already come to a conclusion, haven’t you?”

Daiya continues with an emotionless voice, while lightly touching his right piercing one more time:

“Thus, I am—your enemy.”

Our midterm exams have been returned, and we passed July in sloth, almost as if digesting the results.

“Guys, you absolutely cannot mention that we’re going to go to the mall after this!”

On our way to Mogi-san’s hospital room, Kokone, who has recently made a big bun of her hair, says this.

“Mainly you, Haruaki!”

“I know, I know!”

“I wonder? After all I’ve heard the modern term «Haruaki» also means «Unable to sense the mood».”

“I’ve never heard of such a term! But I know that the modern term «K.K.» means «annoying», though!”

“Hey! Why do my initials mean «annoying»!?”

“Kirino, if Mogi hears this loud voice of yours, your consideration will have been in vain.”

Having been cautioned by Maria—“Tehe!”—Kokone sticks out her tongue while closing an eye and scowls at Haruaki when he mentions, “You ‘thinking that’s cute’ or what?”

Sighing at this relatively normal scene, I enter the hospital room.

“……”

The first thing I see is a half-naked, masculine figure on a magazine cover.

“Kasumi…?”

“Eh…? —AH!”

She hid the magazine in her futon with quick movements.

“H-Hi everyone… W-What’s the matter? You are quite early today, huh…?”

Mogi-san flashes an awkward smile.

“……”

Did I, perhaps, just see something I shouldn’t have…? Kokone and I exchange glances, silently agreeing—“Let’s not touch that subject.”

“Whoa, what are ya hiding there, Kasumi!”

We fail. There is a guy here, whose name means «Unable to sense the mood».

“I-I’m not hiding anything…!”

“Don’t lie! …mh? Ah, it’s a porno magazine, isn’t it! Show me, show me! I want to know to what kind of porno magazines girls get ho— Ghgh!”

Kokone strikes him with her elbow. Yeah, I think she did the right thing.

“Don’t worry Kasumi, we didn’t see anything… No, it’s okay, really! After all, if you’re staying for a long time in a hospital, well… You bottle up a lot, don’t you!”

“I-I-I-I haven’t bottled up anything!”

Mogi-san shakes her hands wildly in front of her crimson face.

“T-That’s not it! This is… well…”

She purses her lips and, hesitating slightly, takes the magazine out of her futon. There is indeed a half-naked man on its cover, but things like “Yoga” and “Proper Training Methods” is written on it.

“It’s a fitness magazine for exercising! So, umm… it’s not an erotic one.”

“Eh? Ah, you’re right. Haha, sorry. …But why were you hiding it then?”

For some reason she doesn’t look at Kokone, but at me when she whispers:

“…that’s because such magazines don’t suit me…”

Now that she mentions it—I reflexively looked at Mogi-san’s arms. Her white arms, which had seemed fragile once, now seems a little more robust. … They’re still plenty slender, though.

Mogi-san notices my gaze and hides her arms bashfully behind her. Then she

says,

“…I hoped it might be useful as a reference for my rehabilitation.”

Four months have already passed since those days of recurrences. Her broken bones had mended and her rehabilitation had started by now. Her eventual return to school, which once seemed like a distant dream, is slowly coming to fruition. Her wheel-chaired presence in the classroom might soon become a part of this everyday life.

Mogi-san will return to this everyday life.

—Like the time before Maria.

“Say, say, Maria, do you feel uneasy around Kasumi?”

Haruaki asks right as we enter the shopping mall, whereas Kokone and I have intentionally kept quiet about it…

“Haru… You know, sometimes you are just dreadful…”

“Why so?”

He didn’t even understand what Kokone meant. Dreadful!

“…why do you think so?”

Maria asks Haruaki plainly with an emotionless voice.

“That’s because I have never seen you two talk to each other properly! Well, maybe that’s just because I rarely catch sight of you two being together.”

“…Haru, listen,” Kokone pulls Haruaki to her and whispers into his ear. “… they are rivals in love… that’s why they get awkward. You should know this much, right…?”

Umm, Kokone…? I know that you’re trying to be considerate, but I can hear you.

“Ooh, I see, I see!”

Haruaki grins broadly at me. …This is quite unnerving.

Maria let out a sigh at their attitude.

“Well, interpret it however you want, but it’s true that I can’t talk to her easily.”

“Hoho! In the sense of being rivals?”

“Usui. Could you speak without reservations to someone who made a fool of you and stabbed your gut with a knife?”

“Hah?”

“It’s a joke.”

When Maria expressionlessly says so, Kokone and Haruaki exchange glances.

…I was the only one whose heart jumped because of this borderline comment.

“…err, so let’s leave this topic… Now onto our main objective!! ‘Let’s search for clothes that suit Mari-mari!’ Well, almost anything would suit her, though… tch, this damn model body of yours!”

You shouldn’t be the one to complain, having your snapshot in a fashion magazine recently.

“Come to think of it, why did this matter come up anyway?”

“Well, just listen! I’ve often met Mari-mari in regular clothes on holidays recently, but you know, she’s obviously neglecting fashion! Her clothes aren’t exactly bad, though, they just lack individuality… and when I asked for the brand she said it’s UNIQLO.”

“Leaving aside how it was in the past, the present UNIQLO has a high fashion value. They offer many high-quality products at low prices made possible by the great endeavor of their company. UNIQLO is the best choice.”

“I wear UNIQLO, too, you know! But that’s not what I mean! I was just thinking, like… you should strive to become your ideal self, or… Aah, damn it! Just because you can win with your body alone…!”

“Kiri, be at ease! You can at least beat her with your bust!”

“Only with my bust?! Don’t kid around, Haru! …I can also beat her in—”

Kokone stops talking, gazing at Maria from head to toe, and was in terror.

“—No way… I have no chance?! Gwaah, that can’t be! You’d better become something like the world’s top idol so I’ll be able to admit that you’re «pretty» without being hurt!”

“…Ko-Kokone, looks are a subjective matter anyway, you know…”

“So who do you find more beautiful, Kazu?”

“……”

“Why do you keep quiet there! Say it’s me, even if it’s a lie!”

“Well, isn’t that an impossible request?”

“Shut up, you visually impaired person.”

“What!? I’m humbly said to be at least above average!”

Because of the ruckus they were causing, the glances of the shoppers in the vicinity start to focus on us. …It’s always the same when Kokone’s with us.

“H-Hey, Kokone, can we slowly…”

When I address her, she looks at me with a harsh glance. Uwa, I feel danger…

“In the first place, Kazu-kun, do you know what I cannot permit the most about Mari-mari’s clothes? It’s the fact that you, just because you’re of the same height, share several pieces of clothing!”

“…eh? Should we not?”

Kokone’s eyes went wide.

“……Hah? What’s with that surprised expression? «…eh? Should we not» my ass! Your common sense is off! I, at least, was shocked when I happened to see you wearing the same T-shirt that Mari-mari had worn on another day!”

I still didn’t get her and shifted my gaze to Haruaki.

“No, she’s right, you know?”

…I was clearly denied.

“You’re that type of person, right? The type that finishes the half-drunk PET bottle, that was given to you by the girl you like, without any problems.”

“Isn’t that normal…?”

“My, my,” Haruaki shook his hands exaggeratedly as if to show me and let out a sigh. …What’s with that reaction.

“Haru, do you understand why I want to make her buy new clothes?”

“More than enough!”

After those two allied, our search for clothes for Maria began as Kokone planned. However, Maria herself didn’t fancy shopping at all and hence just gave Kokone half-hearted opinions of the clothes she was shown. And from time to time, Kokone forced her to try on some of the clothes.

At first, I had thought Kokone would be displeased because Maria doesn’t

buy the clothes she suggests, but in fact Kokone was grinning joyfully. According to her, «It’s already fun just having an outstanding beauty as a dress-up doll!». …As a man I can’t understand her feelings.

Speaking of the other man here, Haruaki, he seemed happy just watching other female clients and shop assistants. I’m jealous of his mode of thought—well, not really. Not at all.

I asked Kokone, who was so full of vigor that I wondered where she got all this energy from, for a break. She did not grant this request until three hours later.

Hah… finally I’m temporarily released.

“…Haruaki, you seem cheerful.”

“Yeah! I spent all this time with the goal of scoring good-looking girls, you know. Ah, that was great! My personal favorite was the shop assistant at the previous shop.”

Kokone’s high spirits got spoiled.

“She resembled our school’s student council president a little. Didn’t you think so, too, Hoshii?”

“Eeeh~~… you think so~?” Kokone objected. “Our student council president is a lot cooler… ah, now that you mention it, do you guys know about the «Three Supermen»?”

“I know of them.” “…Well, there’s no way it wouldn’t enter my ears.”

I am the only one who didn’t know, as it seems.

“…What are those «Three Supermen»?”

“Look, isn’t there one student in each year with outstanding grades? Because all of those three have some special characteristics besides their grades, someone treated them as «supermen». Well, and this term was so fitting that it spread out.”

“…Is Maria perhaps one of them?”

“Yeah. I don’t care about how they call me, but I don’t like to stand out too much.”

No… what are you saying after the scene you made at the entrance ceremony?

“Well, Mari-mari is the one in the first year, the student council president is the one in the third year. And the one in the second year is—”

Kokone stops mid-sentence. One could clearly see how her mood fell.

…so the last one is Daiya.

Daiya disappeared right after he had announced to us his status as an “owner” in the school cafeteria. He didn’t come to school anymore and wasn’t at home either.

Without leaving any words for Kokone and Haruaki.

Kokone is extremely angry about this. She couldn’t understand why he disappeared suddenly without telling her anything. Of course, in truth, she’s only worried about him.

I suppose Kokone considers his disappearance as a temporary matter. That’s why she can be angry. But I… I don’t think this is a temporary state.

After all, Daiya—obtained a “box.”

He became disconnected from our everyday life.

After emptying her caramel macchiato in one gulp with a frown, Kokone let out a sigh and began to speak.

“Anyway, leaving that jerk aside, the point is that those «Three Supermen» are not normal.”

“I can understand this for Maria and Daiya… but is the student council president also this amazing?”

“She is amazing! Apparently her grades would easily be enough to enter Tokyo University; as a member of the track-and-field club she took part in national short distance races and long jump events; and in the student council, she’s putting the lid on those anachronistic school rules. But it seems these superficial facts aren’t even needed to realize how amazing she is.”

“…what do you mean?”

“According to a little story that reached my ears, the president doesn’t seem to be that fast during practice. She even loses to other members sometimes. But at the real thing she almost certainly sets best times and wins.”

“So she’s holding back during practice?”

“Apparently not. «The purpose of practice is to improve your power. The purpose of the real race is to win. It’s only natural that I’m the fastest at the real race when I have to concentrate fully on manifesting my power.» is what she says. …What do you think? She may seem a little strange, but isn’t she somehow amazing?”

“…Yeah. She feels like a human from another dimension.”

“Exactly~”—while saying so, she confirmed that our cups had become empty and smiled complacently.

“Well then! Let’s return to our Mari-mari-dress-up-time!”

Honestly, more of this boredom is tiring…

“Ko-Kokone, it’s soon dinnertime at home, so I should slowly…”

“Eeh~…”

Kokone purses her lips.

“Then just one more! There is something I absolutely want Mari-mari to wear!”

Kokone eventually brought us to a shop that was obviously emitting an atmosphere different from the other ones. Most of the clothes are black and oddly frilled.

“This will definitely suit you! Gothloli-Mari-mari-tan, haah haah”

The clothing the all-too-excited Kokone holds out is a black dress with lots of frills. Understandably, Maria contorts her face slightly while accepting the dress.

“……you want me to wear that?”

“‘Course! …by the way, what do you think about Gothlolis?”

“They seem like they live in their own little worlds.”

“Suits you perfectly then, doesn’t it!”

Eeeeh! W-What’s with this sudden outrageous statement!

I look reluctantly at Maria. Fortunately, she was so fixated on the dress that Kokone had given her that she didn’t seem to mind the statement just now.

Kokone murmurs something like, “Then we need a headdress… or a mini hat might be good as well!” and browses through the accessories.

Maria sighs.

“…If you really don’t want to, you’d better decline properly.”

Maria looks back and forth between my face and the Gothloli dress and says with a hushed voice,

“Do you want to see it, too?”

“Eh?”

“I am asking whether you want to see me wearing this Gothloli dress, too.”

I can’t grasp the intention of this question, but I decide to answer honestly.

“…umm, if I had to say then I’d rather like to see it.”

“I see. If you want to see it so badly, I shall wear it.”

“…no, I didn’t say—”

“I’m only wearing this because you told me to, just so you know. Geez, you really can’t be helped.”

…….umm.

Could it be that Maria wanted to wear it?

And so, Maria turned into a Gothloli.

“Ooh my god, oh my god, oh my god! Mari-mari, st-step on me! With those feet of yours, step on me!!”

Uwa, what should we do? Kokone just broke….

“My selection was just too correct. Don’t you think so, too, Kazu-kun?!”

“Y-Yeah.”

It suits her without doubt. Haruaki is also nodding contentedly and some of the shop assistants are peeking into the dressing room. It suits her that much.

As for Maria, she seems at a loss what kind of face she should make and just crosses her arms without looking anywhere in particular.

“Oi Kazu-kun, that’s all?”

“…What do you mean?”

“You should show more… like, excitement. I want to see something like a sweet third-rate drama from you that starts with you opening your mouth in astonishment and murmuring «So pretty…», upon which Mari-mari tries to hide her bashfulness by saying something like «Hmpf, so you like me all of a sudden just because I look like this?» that makes Kazu-kun object with «N-No, you’re always pretty! You really are pretty, Maria!» and eventually both end up with bright red faces! Because I’ll beat you up then.”

“……I can’t.”

“What a pathetic guy. At a karaoke bar, you’re the type that only sings ballads nobody knows, aren’t you? And I’m sure you’re the kind of guy that sings neither well nor poorly, so nobody can insert a Tsukkomi. …Aah, let’s not

mind Kazu-kun. Say, say, Mari-mari, can I take a photo?”

“Out of the question.”

Maria says with a still-averted gaze and crossed arms.

…Oh? Is she actually embarrassed to be wearing this dress?

“Quit it with the broad grin, Kazuki.”

“Eh?”

“You just made a lewd face. So you wanted to humiliate me by making me wear such a dress, didn’t you?”

“T-That’s not it.”

“Come here for a moment.”

I prepare myself to get rebuked and stand in front of Maria with my head ducked down. Gothloli Maria appears overbearing with her arms crossed.

“Does this suit me?”

Why is she asking? While wondering, I nodded.

“I see.”

Maria removes the frilled headdress from her head. Looking at this headdress, the corners of her mouth raises and,

“…Huh?”

For some reason she put it on my head.

“Yeah, it suits you, too!”

“……Hah?”

Maria seems most amused.

“I wore this because you badly wanted me to do so. That’s how it is, right?”

“…umm.”

“That’s how it is, right?”

“……Yes.”

“Which means: since I listened to one of your selfish requests, I think it would be only be fair if you listened to one of my requests this time. Don’t you agree?”

“…I… suppose so.”

“This dress suits me nicely. We are the same size. In other words, you can

wear it as well.”

“……”

Maria continues with a strong voice that did not permit any refusal,

“Wear it.”

And that’s how I became a Gothloli.

“Uuh…”

I moan while looking at myself in the dressing room.

So wearing it first was part of Maria’s scheme to get me into this appearance. To that end, she wanted to create a situation in which I could not refuse.

Come to think of it, she had looked back and forth between the dress and me back then.

“Oi, aren’t you done getting changed, Kazuki? Open the door already.”

“…Maria. Why do I have to wear this…?”

“Of course because I want to see you as a Gothloli so badly it’s not even funny. Naturally, that includes you being embarrassed.”

This is Maria’s bullying again after a long time…!

I can’t stay in here forever. I prepare myself and open the door.

“Gyahahahahahahaha—”

Kokone instantly points at me and starts laughing. Only Maria, Kokone and Haruaki are supposed to be there in front of the dressing room, but for some reason there are also shop assistants and several unrelated customers. What kind of public execution is this…

“Kyahahaha, Kazuko-chan, you’re so cute!”

While saying so, Kokone takes her mobile phone out and turns it towards me. ……Please don’t…

“S-Stop! Don’t take a photo!”

“Impossible. I have to.”

Not only Kokone, but also Haruaki and even Maria start photographing me. Even though she didn’t let anyone take a photo of her!

“Don’t worry, Kazuki. It’s cute.”

Maria attempts an ambiguous encouragement.

“Alright, and sent!”

“W-Wait a sec Kokone! W-Where did you just send this to?!”

“Ha? To Kasumi, of course!”

“W-What’re you doing?! I-In the first place, didn’t you say we shouldn’t mention to her that we’re going to the mall?!”

“Are you an idiot, Kazu-kun? There is something called ‘priorities’!”

You’re the idiot of the group, Kokone! This is too cruel!

…my mobile phone vibrates right away. I open it hesitatingly. There is one new e-mail. The sender’s name was «Kasumi Mogi».

The text consists of one word.

«Cute ♡»

I don’t care anymore! ☆

I awake to an intense stench that is almost giving me a headache.

“Eh…?”

Confused by this sudden development, I let my voice leak out. The last thing I can remember is that I had slipped into my bed to forget about this event that almost caused me to suffer trauma for the rest of life. After that, I probably fell asleep—

—So, where am I?

It’s pitch-black in here and the air feels as if someone had boiled all desire in a single hot pot. This air clings tenaciously to my body. Tenaciously, to my whole body.

I reluctantly stand up.

The world that enfolds in front of me. Black, black, pure blackness that almost invades my eyeballs. I manage to stop myself from collapsing and hold my ground.

Inside the darkness, I notice a faint light. It flickers with bluish-white light. It

resembles the light of those bug-zappers that burn insects with a high-output current that's often put in front of stores. Although I have the feeling that I shouldn't approach this light, my feet begin to move as if I am drawn to it.

My distance to the light is about five meters. And yet, it seems to move away each time I take a step; my perception is ignoring reality and enlarging this distance.

Guni—

My foot hit against something.

I drop my gaze.

"—HII"

It is a body of a girl.

"Uh, ah, hya! Ha, ha, haa—"

Calming my wild breath, I look at her. It's an unfamiliar young girl with long hair dressed in pajamas—No, I think that I've seen her somewhere before. Could she be an acquaintance on a level where I can faintly remember her…?

She isn't breathing.

But she isn't dead. She has probably "stopped."

I confirm my own clothing. The same clothes I wore when falling asleep—a t-shirt instead of pajamas and trunks.

I see. The two of us were probably brought here while sleeping.

Like this—we were put into this "box".

I finally arrive in front of the bluish-white light. Upon further inspection, it looks like one of those old arcade game machine that secluded Onsen-inns would have. «Kingdom Royale» is written on its screen, which seems to be something like its title.

Next to this machine I see him.

"……Daiya."

He's standing there, unchanged from prior to his disappearance, with piercings in both ears.

"It has been a while, Kazu. Almost two months?"

He says as if to start a small-talk. There are lots of things I want to ask him, but I ask the obvious question first.

"…Is this your 'box'?"

“Do I even need to answer?”

Exactly. He has obviously used his ‘box’ at last.

“Boredom—there are people that blast their own brain away just to escape from this beast.”

When he sees that I frowned upon his cryptic words, the corners of his mouth raises.

“It’s a quote from the ‘Etudes of my 20th Year’”[1]

“…What are you talking about, Daiya?”

“This is the ‘wish’ that was put into this ‘Game of Idleness’.”

I’m unable to grasp his intention.

“Of course you can’t understand me, can you? There’s no way you would know boredom when you are able to enjoy your everyday life. You can’t imagine how terribly agonizing it is!”

Does Daiya want to say that he invoked this ‘Game of Idleness’ and involved us because he was «bored»?

That would be just too selfish and foolish.

“Judging from your face, you don’t even want to try understanding me, huh. People with no imagination are always so conceited.”

“…you can’t deceive me. To use a ‘box’ just to ward off your boredom would be too absurd!”

“I don’t care if you don’t understand. But at least remember that this feeling exists as well.”

“…You just have to cure this feeling, no?”

“That’s impossible. It’s a problem that has to do with the respective person’s nature. You can’t change your nature.”

“That’s just… a bad excuse!”

“Then fix this abnormal attachment to that daily life of yours!”

I close my mouth.

“No matter what you do, no matter where you go, you can’t get away from your nature. A seedy-looking guy cannot change his seedy looks, no matter how expensive the clothes he wore, no matter if he spent an hour just for applying make-up. You can’t change the unchangeable.”

“…even if boredom’s so agonizing, how does it come up anyway? Aren’t

there lots of enjoyable things?”

“‘Natures’ are like this. Every event changes its shape according to your nature. Things that you find enjoyable are pure boredom for people that have ‘boredom’ as nature.”

“…although your high abilities are the envy of the school.”

“I’m ordinary. I know that because I can see the limit of my abilities. I realized that I can neither achieve nor attain anything.”

This humble statement surprises me.

I would have never dreamed that Daiya was thinking like this although he seems to have great confidence in himself.

“The ‘box’ is no more than a way to kill time for people who are engulfed by boredom. Thus, this is only a game. A pointless game.”

He explains and starts to grin.

“But it’s very valuable to me nonetheless.”

I’m still unable to understand his logic; but I understand that it’s impossible to persuade him with words.

“…tell me, Daiya. What does this ‘box’ specifically do?”

Daiya laughs faintly, grasps my shoulders, and makes me sit down in front of the game machine.

“It’s just a game for the sake of killing time. It has no other purpose than staving off boredom. So—”

“—Let’s have a meaningless death match.”

“…Eh?”

Daiya is pressing his thumbs against my collarbone so I can’t escape. The screen starts to sway. I feel almost intoxicated.

—*grab*

Something grabbed my head in my trance.

Something comes out of the game machine’s screen. It’s a transparent hand. I’m grabbed by this transparent hand.

“Ugh…”

Noise reverberates in my head. The number of transparent hands are steadily

increasing. Increasing. More and more of those hands grab my head, my arms, my legs, my abdomen, and cover my whole body.

“Da-Daiya—!!”

Daiya coldly ignores my grimace and says,

“Go.”

And then I am—drawn in by those hands.

1. ↑ A book by Touzou Haraguchi, published after he committed suicide during his 20th year. http://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000740/card49078.html

GAME START

新藤色葉

音無麻理亜

星野一輝

大嶺醍哉

神内昂大

柳悠里

▶First Day <A> [Kazuki Hoshino]‘s room

The first thing I see is a naked light bulb dangling from a blank concrete ceiling. I have no idea where I am, and I leap up in surprise.

“…What room am I in?”

Even as I try to stem my increasing confusion, I try to remember how I got here.

I went to sleep in the lower bunk like I normally do. I don’t remember going anywhere after that. Neither do I remember having changed the place, nor having met anyone.

I look around the six tatami-size room. I see a toilet and a washbowl. There’s a table in the center of the room, and a jute bag is sitting on top of the table.

But what stands out most is the modern 20-inch screen embedded in the wall. It seems totally out-of-place in this prison-like room.

I focus my attention on myself. I’m wearing my school uniform, and all my pockets are empty.

I reach into the jute bag and take out one item after another.

A ball-point pen.

A memo book.

A blue digital watch.

Seven portions of solid food.

There’s also a portable terminal that looks exactly like an «iPod touch».

Finally–

“—”

A heavy-duty knife.

I carefully remove its sheath. It’s a solid blade with a serrated edge. It’s like a combat knife that could appear in the hands of a soldier in a movie.

“…What the heck…? Why do I need…”

This is obviously a weapon. A tool made to kill.

Someone is trying to make me fight? Is fighting my only choice?

I shake my head and throw the knife back into the bag. I’m trembling, so I take a deep breath and try to calm down.

I look around the room one more time. There’s no window, and I don’t see any vents. There’s only one door, and it seems really heavy. I consider opening it, but then I realize there’s no doorknob. Just in case, I push lightly against it, but it doesn’t move an inch.

I totter over to my bed and plunk myself down.

“What’s going on here…?”

I don’t get it. I don’t get it… but this is an abnormal situation.

–Abnormal - totally outside the bounds of my everyday life.

Aah, is this perhaps–

«Good - morning»

Hearing a totally unexpected voice makes my heart skip a beat.

I turn my head. –What’s going on?– An odd-looking creature has appeared on the previously blank screen.

«HaHaHa - Good - morning - Kazuki-kun»

In contrast to the intimate way I’m being addressed, the voice sounds awfully machine-like and utterly lacking in intonation. The garishly green thing on the screen is supposed to represent a bear… I guess. Probably. Because of its squinty eyes and ill-formed body, it doesn’t look cute at all. Put bluntly, it looks gross.

«YaaYaaYaa - Do - you - feel - well? I am - Noitan - the mascot! PleaseD to - meet you»

The bear’s –Noitan’s?– mouth moves up and down. It’s animated terribly, with just the chin moving up and down, reinforcing thes same vibe: totally gross.

“…What a horrible mascot. It would make kids cry…”

«Who is horrible, you fucking pig! Shall I maim you by crushing your balls? That would serve you right!»

“……Whoa!”

I-It just responded to what I said! On top of that, it’s got an extremely foul mouth! And why is it suddenly speaking so naturally!? Also, the graphics depicting those bloodshot eyes is just too scary!

“…U-umm… are you able to talk to me?”

«Yes - I am - able to!»

The original tone has returned.

It seems it’s set to speak naturally only when he’s angry.

“Noitan,”

«You over-familiar piece of shit, why won’t you add a “san” to my name!? Also, speak with greater respect!»

“……Noitan-san. I don’t know how I got here, so I’m wondering where I am?”

«You are inSide - the game - called - [Kingdom Royale]! I will - eXplain it later - at the place - where eVeryone has gone, but –»

“Everyone…? So I’m not the only one here?!”

«Shut the fuck up when I’m speaking or do you want me to tear your tongue out?!»

“……I am sorry.”

«The door - will now open! You wilL go to - the place - where all participants - of this game are gaThered! I will - eXplain it to you - there so please - wait a moment»

After Noitan finishes speaking, the heavy door starts to swing open, slowly but steadily.

“…May I leave?”

«Please do - if you have - prepareD yourself!»

“Prepared myself…?”

«Beyond thiS door - is the big room - Are you prepared - to mEet the humans - that aRe in the same - position as you?»

“What are we going to do?”

Noitan contorts his eerie-looking face and says,

«Mortal combat!»

“……..Eh? What does this–”

The screen shuts down before I can finish my sentence. At the same time, the door had swung completely open.

–What on earth is this?

Darkness blankets whatever is on the other side of the doorway.

Is there really a room out there? …I can’t believe it.

But I’m sure I can’t refuse to go.

I put on the blue watch that was on the table and stand in front of the doorway. Despite the doubts that assail my mind, I try to reassure myself that I’m making the right choice:

…It’s alright. It should be alright.

Nothing good awaits me out there. But, I am inside a ‘box’, so she must be here.

–Maria is here.

So it’s alright.

This is what I’m thinking as I leap into the dark.

▶First Day <B> Big room

Immediately, everything around me changes.

All I can see is white., an unnatural white that makes me feel like a visitor to a freshly built, empty hospital without any doctors, nurses or patients.

When I finally manage to realize this much–

“Ueh…?”

–I am knocked over.

Without having time to wonder or to feel the pain of the hard ground striking against my back, the point of a knife thrusts before my very eyes.

“Your name?”

Seeing the girl with shoulder length hair that is holding a knife in front of me, I finally realize what is happening to me.

“H-HII…!!”

“You’re called «HII»? That’s not true, is it? Didn’t I ask you for your name?”

W-Who is this?

“K-Kazuki Hoshino.”

I notice that she is wearing our school’s uniform and, on her left hand, an orange digital watch. Naturally, the color is different from mine.

So is she a participant of this game? …eh? Perhaps, the life and death fight has already begun and am I just checkmated? W-Wait a moment! Isn’t that too cruel?!

Though my situation seems so hopeless–

“Kazuki!”

–Aah, just by hearing this voice I am able to calm down.

“Mh, Otonashi-san, is this an acquaintance of yours?”

“Yeah, he is.”

Returning her gaze, the girl with shoulder-length hair looks at me with

observing eyes.

“…Huuh.”

Having said so, she stands up without changing her expression and steps back. I don’t really get it, but it seems I was released.

“Are you alright, Kazuki?”

“Y-Yeah…”

I answer while taking Maria’s hand after she rushes to me.

“B-But why on earth did she–”

“–Whoa!”

I stop my words when another voice resounds, and turn around in wonder. The girl from before is holding her knife against an upright guy with brown hair.

“…umm, what, all of a sudden?”

He asks, while looking around using only his eyes. He’s startled, but seems to have enough composure to examine us.

“…You’re pretty composed, aren’t you?”

Having noticed this, she says so to the brown-haired guy.

“Not at all, actually… well, but I noticed that ‘Aah, you’re not serious’, so I could stay cool somehow.”

She answers with a meaningful “Ohoo” to his words, then she removes her knife and releases him.

“…Ah, do you let me go already?”

“Do what you want.”

…She releases the brown-haired guy readily as well, huh. I really wonder why she’s doing this?

The released brown-haired guy already flashes a smile as if he forgot what just happened to him and said,

“Oh, there are a whole three hotties! Lucky me!”

Three…? Umm, Maria, the girl that assaulted me with a knife, and–

I discover a girl with long hair that is curled up into a ball next to the big monitor in this room. With her white skin and the contrastive deep black hair, the girl made a trim impression on me.

Also, she is wearing a beige digital watch on her left wrist.

“Don’t worry, Yuuri!”

The knife-wielding girl pats the head of the black-haired girl and smiles at her, showing a kindness she did not display to us. The face of the black-haired girl that is being contorted in fear relaxes slightly, but this lasts only for a short moment.

“…What will become of us…?”

“We’ll be fine!”

…It seems those two are acquainted.

“You’re Hoshino-senpai, right?”

Being addressed, I remove my glance from those two. It’s the brown-haired guy from before.

“Do you know me?”

“Of course! Senpai, aren’t you famous, together with this Maricchi over there? You can’t tell me that you forgot about that *legendary* entrance ceremony!”

He is wearing a crinkled uniform, a silver necklace and on his wrist a green digital watch. …come to think of it, everyone here wears our school’s uniform.

“Umm, what’s your name?”

“I am – ah! Kaichou, it seems we’re all here now, so how about an introduction?”

He says to the knife-girl.

«Kaichou»? Does this mean that she’s the student council chairman? One of the three supermen Kokone told me about?

“Mh, right. That might not be bad.”

Now that he mentions it, I have often heard this crisp voice in announcements over mic. This self-confidently smiling girl is… right, without doubt the student council chairman.

So–

I’ll have to fight against those supermen in this life and death fight?

“Do you think this is everyone?”

The student council chairman asks him.

“There are six chairs, so I guess so.”

“Well, yeah.”

…eh? Six?

“Wait a sec! Aren’t we only five–”

“Kazu, are your eyes made of glass?”

I hold my breath when I hear these words.

In the center of the room is an oblong table with six chairs arranged evenly around it. On the furthest one from me is, he.

“…Daiya.”

The uniformed Daiya contorts his mouth slightly, and raises the hand on which he is wearing a black digital watch, as if to send me a light greeting.

Despite this being the first time we meet in almost two months, despite this being at such a place, his greeting was light as if we had just met.

“What? Do you know each other? ……I see.”

“Kaichou. Can I take this as your assessment of the risk that we may ally against you?”

The chairman loses her composure for an instant, but then she snorts. She continues,

“I leave that to your own judgement.”

This time it is Daiya who smirks at her words.

What kind of exchange are those two having…? Almost as if they are already preparing for war.

…No, or has it already begun? Is this the reason why she held a knife against me?

“I’m the only one without acquaintances then? I feel so lonely~”

The brown-haired one embraces his head exaggeratedly as if he hasn’t noticed the tension between the two of them at all. …I wonder if that guy even knows what situation he is in…?

“Right, we were going to introduce ourselves. Shall we do it then? For now, let’s sit down since there are seats after all.”

I sit down in front of Daiya and Maria takes the spot next to me. Maria is

wearing a watch on her wrist as well. The color is red.

“Okay, many of you should already know me, but I’ll start with my introduction. I am–”

“Before that, can I ask one question?”

Maria scowls at the chairman in front of her and asks so.

“What?”

“I didn’t intervene because I did not sense the will to harm anyone in you… but what was this threat with your knife supposed to be?”

“Aah, that?”

Seeming not to care about Maria’s scowl, the chairman starts to explain.

“If you’ve got the same explanation as I have from that silly bear, you should know that a «death-feud» game is going to be carried out here, right? Therefore, I considered that there might be someone who would want to take the initiative while everyone is still confused. So I thought by doing so I could prevent this. In short; crisis management.”

“Ha!”

Daiya snorts at this explanation. The chairman seems obviously offended.

“Uumm… Daiya Oomine-kun, was it, right? I’ve heard of you in rumors. So, what was that sardonic laugh supposed to mean?”

“I just thought that this was a painful lie. Crisis management? Do you seriously believe there is a militant that would cause a massacre just by this explanation of that bear? You merely tried to make the first move in order to be in a psychologically superior position, or am I wrong? Be at ease, the only one who could do this is you, who can arrive at such a thought!”

“A strategy to be in a psychologically superior position, huh. You’re getting me wrong, totally wrong. I would not use such means in which the downside outweighs the benefit. If I acted clumsily and incurred someone’s enmity, I would be the one at risk, right?”

“Then was it a check for the wirepuller? Did you try to find suspicious people by their reaction?”

“I didn’t think that far. How rude.”

Her replies are light. However, the anxiety in the air cannot be hidden by that.

“Whoa, chill out Senpais! You’re really scary!”

The brown-haired guy interrupts them.

“…Okay. But you sure are calmed down, aren’t you? You’re quite a strange fellow.”

“Cut it out please! I’m like this just because I can’t keep cool. Usually, I act more maturely, but how should I say it, a strange tension’s in the air now… Well, but I think I’m not as tense as your friend there, Kaichou.”

When the conversation goes towards her, the docile-looking girl cringes her shoulders.

“I-I’m sorry…”

“No, Yuuri. You have no reason to apologize.”

“I-I’m sorry, Iroha.”

The chairman laughs and shrugs her shoulders when seeing how she apologizes right again.

“Aah~… somehow I lost my tension.”

“Yuuri-chan, nice!”

He sends her a thumbs up.

“Eh? Eh? Did I do anything…?”

She blinks puzzledly, which makes the chairman giggle again.

“Shall we return to our main subject and start the introduction? I am the third year Iroha Shindou and, as you may know, the chairman of the student council. My special skill is that I can sleep anywhere. My hobby is track and field.”

“While being able to participate in events all over the land, Track and field athletics is just your hobby, huh? I bet you’re quite unpopular, aren’t you?”

Daiya butts in.

“You have a sharp tongue, huh? But it’s a simple fact that it’s my hobby. After all I’m not suited for track-and-field. In those events you have no other choice but to rely on your physical nature. And I’m not so gifted in that. Hence, I’m not suited. It’s just a hobby.”

“It’s called ‘sarcasm’!”

”’-The youngster said sarcastically.’”

The chairman counters nonchalantly. To be able to keep up with Daiya, she really is superhuman.

She pokes the girl next to her with her elbow, urging her to continue.

“Ah, I-I am, um, a third-year and, err, was on good terms with Iroha in the first year when we were in the same class… umm, special skills and such as well, Iroha? Uuumm… I don’t know of any special skill… but my hobby is to read. My name is Yuuri – Yuuri Yanagi.”

“Eh?”

I mutter unknowingly.

Did she just say «Yanagi»?

“……Eh? Umm, d-did I say something weird?”

The girl that named herself «Yuuri Yanagi» becomes confused by my behavior.

“Ah”

I come to my senses again and shake my hands desperately.

“N-Nevermind! It’s just that I know someone with the same surname.”

“I-I see…”

Yanagi-san–would be confusing, so I’ll use Yuuri-san–is still looking in wonder at me, but then,

“Yuuri, are you done?”

“Ah, err…”

She is told so by the chairman and removes her gaze from me.

“Pl-Pleased to meet you.”

…Oh no, maybe she received a strange impression from me.

The brown-haired guy that is grinning at me opens his mouth.

“Yuuri-chan’s really cute. She’s my type.”

“Fhue!”

“Hey, first year, don’t hit on Yuuri! Also, you’re overfamiliar adding a ‘chan’.”

“By the way, you’re too strong-willed, hence not my type, Kaichou.”

“I don’t care. Now get on with your introduction.”

“Oka~y. I’m the first year Koudai Kamiuchi, nice to meet you. Ah, it’s especially nice to meet you, Yuuri-chan. Then, my hobby is to play on the slot machine. …ah, just to get things straight, the ones at game centers.”

Surprisingly, Daiya interrupts the introduction of the brown-haired guy,

Koudai Kamiuchi.

“Aah, you’re that Kamiuchi, huh. I often hear rumors about you. Seems you have never lost on a Pachinko machine?”

“That’s not true, though. Well, but on the whole I definitely win. I have good eyes, basically.”

“The guy called Haruaki Usui scouted you once to get you to enter the baseball club, right? Because you were famous as the one that stormed through the sport tournaments in middle school.”

“Scout? Can’t really remember… but no, no, high school baseball is seriously impossible for me! And anyway, there’s no way someone as delicate as me could keep up with that draconic practice, right? The go-home club suits me best.”

Could it be that Kamiuchi-kun is, while not at the level of the «Three Supermen», an amazing person…?

“…umm, Yuuri-san.”

“Y-Yes?”

“Are you, by any chance, also extremely smart?”

“Eh? I-I am, um… not really.”

“Yuuri is always at the top in class 1.”

The chairman said plainly.

Third year, class one? That’s an elite class in liberal arts that’s aiming for the universities of Tokyo and Kyoto. She’s number one there…?

“T-That’s because you’re in the science class, Iroha. If you were in the liberal arts class, I’d lose to you without doubt…”

“Ah, by the way, it seems my results in the entrance exams were the second best. Yuuri-chan, we’re both second placers that can’t rival over-talented first placers, aren’t we?”

“H-Haah…”

So Kamiuchi-kun isn’t an ordinary person either.

“Hmm. I think I grasped the commonality of us. Top students… well, since science and liberal arts are quite different, so I can’t say for sure, but it seems we’re a gathering of each year’s first and second place students. The number of people would just fit.”

“Ah, but my results are just barely above-average? My results in the last

exams were relatively good, but I was still just at the lower to–”

I swallow my started word.

Because the chairman, Yuuri-san and Kamiuchi are staring at me.

…Why? Did I just say something strange?

“Just confirming: Otonashi-san and Oomine-kun are top students, right?”

The chairman says with her gaze fixed on me. I nod silently.

“I see.”

She then asks with a smile in which only the eyes are not smiling:

“So why are you the only exception, I wonder?”

I wince at the coercion she didn’t even bother to conceal.

What is this? Why do they look at me like that?

“There is a limit to rashness.”

Hearing these words, the chairman removes her gaze from me. From me – to Maria.

“Why are you so strained when we don’t even know what kind of game this is? Does this mean that you endorse this «death-feud» and are eager to participate in it? If so, then you are the one we should be cautious of.”

“I-I agree. After all it’s not like anything has started yet…”

Upon hearing Maria out, Yuuri-san says so while peeking at the chairman.

As for the chairman, she purses her lips for a while. It’s not like she’s pouting - this merely seemed to be her habit when thinking.

She tightens her mouth and says with a sigh,

“That’s also true. Since it’s only a hypothesis that we’re a gathering of top students, it would be weird to be cautious of someone only because he doesn’t fit in, huh. Also, I guess I’d be tripped up by someone if I continued doubting everyone without basis.”

“Well, and the way I see it, you’re the most suspicious of us, Kaichou, with your actions being too quick.”

“Hahaha, I am suspicious? Take a look in the mirror sometime.”

Daiya flashes a satisfied grin upon hearing her words.

“…Umm, what are you doing? Are you already searching for the culprit?”

The corners of the chairman’s mouth raises slightly to this question I ask

because I couldn’t follow their conversation.

“Rather than searching for the culprit, I’m just looking for people I have to be careful about. The wirepuller that schemed this game could be among us or a supporter of him could be here to try to spur this «death-feud» on. I want to disclose this as soon as possible if I discover something - before it’s too late.”

The wirepuller, huh.

Wirepuller, my ass – I know who the cause of this is.

–Daiya Oomine. Only he can possibly be the culprit.

…But I realize that I can’t just tell them of this fact.

Careless statements are not allowed here. I’m getting doubted just because I’m no top student. Actions that go against the flow of the others lead to doubt immediately.

What would happen if I said «this is the deed of a ‘box’ which was used by Daiya»?

It would seem more absurd to them than it is already. At most, they would think that I’d be trying to make Daiya the bad guy.

Therefore, no matter how true it is, I can’t tell them about the ‘box’.

This is probably also the reason why Maria has fallen into silence with a stern expression.

«WeLl, well, well - IT - seeMs you have - alreAdy started - tHe fuN of douBting - each oTher - as hoPed for - Very nicE»

We look all at once at the big monitor in the center of the room.

On display is the absolutely not cute green bear from before. His repulsiveness is even more conspicuous on the bigger screen.

The chairman flashes a wry smile while looking at the monitor.

“Uglypooh appeared again.”

«Watch your mouth and call me “Noitan-san”! Don’t be proud of yourself just because you’re a stinky council prez’ of some school!»

The chairman herself smiles full of ease, but Yuuri-san is startled by this foul mouth and graphic and cringes with a small scream.

…It’s not like her body’s small, but she sure looks like a little animal… though I’m not one to speak, since people often say the same to me.

“Give us an explanation already, Uglypooh.”

«Are you too dumb to comprehend words!? I hope you die first, bitch!»

“Oi, Kaichou-sama! Could you *please* be quiet? We won’t get anywhere like this.”

“Aye, aye.”

The chairman just shrugs her shoulders at Daiya’s sarcasm and closes her mouth obediently. After some silence Noitan cheers up again, his graphic returned to the normal one and he starts to speak with his awkward voice.

«I wiLl now - eXplain what - [Kingdom Royale] - is aBout!»

I gaze silently at the monitor.

«This is bAsically - a kiLLer-game - but to be - a liTtle more prEcise - it’s a gAme - in which eVEryone tries - to stEal - the kinG’s thronE!»

We exchange glances when hearing Noitan’s explanation.

«A [class] was - aSsigned to eaCh one - of you partiCipants - [Classes] can bE [King], [Prince], [The Double], [Sorcerer], [Knight] and [Revolutionary]! ThEy all hAve - their speCial - characTeristics»

“How can we find out our own [class]?”

«You cAn check - yoUr [class] on - the mOnitor in - yOur room! By the wAy - they are - tOUch-sensitive and cAn be - contrOlled acCording - to yOur [class]»

The chairman frowns and waits for the continuation.

«Okay, beFore I - explain to you - the [classes] - I will gIve you - sOme informaTion - about the stAge - of this [Kingdom Royale]! You knOw - this cOuntry - is a dicTatorship - that has invAded - many otHer countriEs - and–»

“Noitan.”

Maria interrupts Noitan who is about to start an explanation that would most likely be skipped by the players if it was a game.

«What - iS it - Maria-chan - ?»

“We don’t need that. Just tell us what we need to know about this game already.”

«You’ve got some nerve to take up such an attitude when I’m about to explain it all kindly to you! You’re conceited, you stinky brat!»

The graphic changes once again to the usual blood-shot eyes.

“Didn’t you use ‘stinky’ already for Shindou just now? What a poor vocabulary.”

«If you have the time for fault-finding you’d better find a fucking way to survive, you poor caged bird!»

Satisfied, his graphic returns to normal.

«It can - nOt be - hElped - I wIll - tell yOu - only the iMportant - pArts! FiRstly - you hAve to - abIde by the - timetable striCtly - or else yOu will - automaticAlly [lose] - So be - carefuL»

“…what happens when we [lose]?”

«Execution»

The air freezes.

«BeheAding to - bE exact! FAir enough - is it nOt? - Someone wHo can - not eVen abIde - by the tiMe - should beTter - just diE - aftEr all»

Yuuri-san doesn’t even blink. And as soon as she realizes that «execution» is to be taken literally, her face loses even more of its color.

Noitan ignores her reaction completely and proceeds.

«Also, - thEre is a - univErsal time liMit! Your fOod supply - consists of - sEven portions - of sOlid food - This is jUst enough - for oNe week - You wIll - not be hUngry - if you eAt one - of these mAgical - portions of sOlid food - eaCh day! HoweVer - if you fAil - to eAt one - each dAy - you wIll becoMe - a muMmy due to - hunGer!»

“A mummy… huh.”

The chairman scratches her head with pursed lips.

“So, how can I win this game? Honestly, I have no clue what to do.”

«Alright - the conditions to win - vary according to - your [classes] - For example - if you are - the [King] - you can win by - eliminating all players - that aim for - the throne! I wIll now - diSplay the - deTails for - eAch one»

Noitan disappears from the screen, letters replacing him.

[King]

He is the king who has ascended to the throne by assassinating the previous ruler and has carried out many invasions. Having a distrustful personality, he’s scheming murder of the ones that threaten his throne. He does not notice that his distrust makes others lose their loyalty for

him.
He can request his subordinates to commit [murder], but he cannot force them because he fears their animosity could become directed at him.
A land ruled by a man that cannot trust others is unlikely to have a bright future.

Skills of the [King]	• **[Murder]** He can select a player he wants to kill and request the [Sorcerer] or the [Knight] to execute this action. He does not need to select. • **[Substitution]** He can once avoid being the target of [Assassination] by changing roles with [The Double] for a single day. If he was selected as the target on this day, [The Double] will die instead of the [King].
Victory conditions for the [King]	To protect his throne. (Elimination of the ones that threaten the king's throne - [Prince] [Revolutionary])

[Prince]

An ambitious person. He was originally only at the third place in the inheritance order of the king's rank. But taking advantage of the king's mistrust, he made him murder the other princes and moved up to the first place. He acquired anti-magic to guard himself against this mistrust.
If he comes to the throne, this land is likely to turn into a worse dictatorship than it was before.

Skills of the [Prince]	• **[Throne Succession]** He becomes able to use [Murder] once the [King] and [The Double] die. • **[Anti-magic]** He cannot be killed by [Sorcery].

Victory conditions for the [Prince]	To become the king. (Elimination of [King] [The Double] [Revolutionary])

[The Double]

An ex-farmer who is loyal to the [King] and looks exactly the same as him. He is not really ambitious, but he can absolutely not allow the [Prince] to become the king since he was always made a fool by him.
If he, with no ideals, becomes the king, this land is likely to fall into ruin in no time.

Skills of [The Double]	• **[Inheritance]** If the [King] dies or [Substitution] was executed, he becomes able to use [Murder].
Victory conditions for [The Double]	Death of the ones that try to kill him. (Death of [Prince] [Revolutionary])

[Sorcerer]

A subordinate of the [King]. He is the teacher of the [Prince] in magic and also gets on well with the [Prince]. He is satisfied as long he can pursue his studies in magic and has no interest in the king’s throne whatsoever.
No matter how much he can raise his magic skills, nobody will value a person that secludes himself in his shell.

Skills of the [Sorcerer]	• **[Sorcery]** He can choose whether to effectively kill the character that was selected by [Murder]. The targeted character will become a burnt corpse.
Victory conditions for the [Sorcerer]	To survive.

[Knight]

A subordinate of the [King]. While being a subordinate, he is plotting revenge on the royal family for they have ruined his homeland. He believes firmly that he can only attain happiness by exterminating the royal family.
As a matter of course, a man that has drowned in his own feelings of loss will only fall into the darkness of misfortune.

Skills of the [Knight]	• **[Deathblow]** He can choose whether to effectively kill the character that was selected by [Murder]. Only executable when the [Sorcerer] is dead. The targeted character will die due to beheading.
Victory conditions for the [Knight]	To take revenge. (Death of [King] [Prince])

[Revolutionary]

He is the right arm of the [King]. Because of his competence, he realized that this land is going to fall into ruin if it goes on like this. Hence, he prepared himself to take over the land.
A ruler that has accumulated feelings of bitterness due to assassinations is incapable of leading a kingdom. At most he will be assassinated himself.

Skills of the [Revolutionary]	• **[Assassination]** He can assassinate the selected character. He does not need to select one. The targeted character will become a strangulated corpse.
Win conditions of the [Revolutionary]	To become the king. (Murder of [King] [Prince] [The Double])

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* The game ends when all victory conditions for the remaining players have been met.

Everyone is silently reading the text to themselves and trying to understand its

meaning.

I, too, am staring at the monitor with all my might, but I'm at a loss what to do. I merely understand that words like [Murder] and [Assassination] were proof of [Kingdom Royale] being a killer-game.

"Hey, Uglypooh. How can we actually execute those [Sorcery] or [Assassination] actions?"

The chairman asks.

«The commAnd is - displaYed on the - monItor in the rOom - of the coRresponding player - You jUst have - to prEss the buttOn - on the monitor - in orDer to exEcute - the cOmmand! TherefOre - it's as sImple - to kill somEone - as to bUy a ticket.»

Everyone apart from me turns pale upon hearing this. I don't quite understand why everyone is showing such a reaction and look at Maria.

"…Maria, umm."

"Do you not see the great danger in this?"

I shake my head slowly. Seeing this, Daiya laughs amazedly. …I don't know, so it can't be helped, can it!

"Okay, let's assume you consider yourself in danger. …no, that's still too soft. Let's assume you noticed that you're definitely going to die. To escape from this crisis you have to kill a certain person. Could you kill this certain person with a knife, Kazuki?"

"T-There's no way I could!"

"So what if you just had to press a button?"

"Eh…?"

By pressing a single button I could protect my own life. By stealing someone else's life.

"……I-I still couldn't! Something like killing…"

"Well, I guess it's like this for you. However, do you think the other people here arrive at the same conclusion?"

I look around spontaneously.

The active student council chairman. The anxious-seeming Yuuri-san. The strangely lighthearted Kamiuchi-kun. Finally, the 'owner' - Daiya.

"Do you have positive proof that all six participants here, including you, will not steal someone's life if their own life's at risk? …Honestly speaking, I

don’t.”

It’s probably the same for the others.

“Everyone is probably considering that someone might kill them. And I don’t even need to say that this suspicion is going to worsen our situation even more, right?”

“B-But just because you can kill someone by pressing a button doesn’t mean that you would readily be able to do it!”

“But what if the time limit draws near?”

“…Time limit?”

“Hasn’t the green bear said it? That there is an universal time limit; in other words we’ll die as soon our food supply runs out. This means that everyone loses when there is no winner… in other words, we’d all die.”

I hold my breath.

“Our goal is not to become the winner. It’s to slip out of this game. But when the time runs out, this goal is going to shake. There will be people that give up attaining this goal. They might prioritize to survive. They might start to think it’s better to meet their victory conditions than dying with everyone. And when the first corpse appears–it’s the end.”

“……why?”

“There was a corpse. The other players found out that there is someone that plays this game actively. If they did nothing, they would all just be killed. Therefore, the other players would have no choice but to participate properly as well. In that case, the game will go on until there is a winner.”

Maria explains plainly - no one objected. The others were probably agreeing with her.

“When the first corpse appears, it’s the end…”

In short, we have to find a way out of this game before someone makes a mistake.

«So so sO - did you unDerstand - how thIs - gAme works? I wIll now - disPlay the timEtable! - Abide by - thIs timetaBle and - move wiThin - a 5 minutes toLerance - okay?»

The screen clears and a timetable is displayed on it.

~12 **<A>**

- Break, standby in own room

12~14 **<B>**

- Gathering in the big room

14~18 **<C>**

- Selection of [Secret Meeting] partner until 14:40. Spend 30 minutes in the room of the selected character.
- The [King] is able to select a target for [Murder].
- The [Sorcerer] can use [Sorcery] (the [Knight] can use [Deathblow]).
(The character that was targeted by [Sorcery] or [Deathblow] will die at 17:55)

18~20 **<D>**

- Gathering in the big room.

20~22 **<E>**

- Dinner in own room.
(If no food supply available, death by turning into a mummy)
- The [Revolutionary] can use [Assassination].
(The character that was targeted by [Assassination] will immediately die)

22~ **<F>**

- Break, sleep

«You dO not - nEed to - tAke notEs! The detAiled - inforMation about - tHe classEs as weLl - as the timEtable - is inSide - your pOrtable - tErminals - ConVersations are - also loGged on - this tErminal - so I hoPe it - wiLl be of uSe»

“Uhe, this conversation is recorded on this thing?”

“Did you say something that should not be recorded or what?”

The chairman presses Kamiuchi-kun right after that exclamation.

“No, actually. What are you trying to insinuate…?”

“Didn’t you think that you’d have to be careful to not say anything that would let others guess your [class]? I see you’re eager to participate in the game!”

Kamiuchi-kun smiles wryly.

“Haha, well, there’s no one who would want to show a weak spot in the present state of affairs.”

It’s understandable that Kamiuchi-kun is on his guard. Even I want to know the [classes] of the others, even though I don’t plan to participate in the game. Especially the ones opposing me and the dangerous [Revolutionary].

For this purpose we will most likely read these logs.

But this action in itself might be dangerous. I have a hunch that if we get anxious and read through the log while being tormented by suspicion, even trifling statements will catch our eyes and make our suspicion even worse.

Eventually, unable to endure this suspicion, someone will press the button and–

…Right. I’m sure that even this log is just a means to make us participate in the game.

«Okay thEn - I wiSh all oF you a - good fight! - Just dOn’t end - the gAme by - doing somEthing - as bOring - as tuRning - into muMmies everyone - okAy?»

After that, Noitan vanishes from the monitor.

“That damn Uglypooh…”

The chairman curses.

The painful mechanical voice went away and the room turns silent. Everyone keeps quiet and doesn’t even open their mouth. Maybe this is also because everyone knows that our conversations are recorded, so it’s annoyingly hard to speak.

The chairman is the one to break the silence.

“Otonashi-san.”

“What?”

“You stated beforehand incidentally that «to slip out from this game» is our goal. But do you think this is possible?”

“Of course I do. Do you not think so?”

“I… honestly, I think it might be very hard. After all I comprehend with logic and my feeling is that this environment here is «abnormal». I’m assuming this is not just my opinion, but everyone else’s too, am I wrong?”

Yuuri-san and Kamiuchi-kun nods. I nod hurriedly, too.

“Do you think there is an escape path prepared for us in such an [absurd] place? If you do think so, please tell me your basis.”

Despite her light tone, her voice is firm like in an interrogation.

Even the others are looking at Maria like jurors.

…Maria has a basis for her assertion. Maria knows that one can slip out somehow from this ‘box’, no matter how absurd this place is.

She peeks at me for only an instant and,

“…it might be hard indeed. But it’s the only goal we have. So I think we have to believe in it, no matter how hopeless it might seem… or am I wrong?”

As expected, she hides the fact of the ‘box’.

“I guess so. It’s as you say.”

The chairman seems to have accepted Maria’s unhesitating justification.

“Kaichou. Your «slipping out of this game is hard»-like statement just now was an announcement of your participation in this killer-game, right?”

Daiya asks sarcastically, again with a triumphant look.

“Trying to find faults again? You’re wrong! I would never kill anyone. Even if, for argument’s sake, murder would not be a sin here and one could kill just by pressing a single button, the fact that one committed murder would never disappear. Eventually, I would not be able to carry this sin on my shoulders and I’d destroy my life. So I could never do it, as I’m able to imagine this much.”

Daiya clicks his tongue at this perfect-seeming answer.

“It’s the same… for me.”

“We all know that you couldn’t, Yuuri-chan~! Ah, by the way, I’ll go with this answer, too.”

“Look at yourself jumping on the bandwagon… Yuuri aside, I can’t trust your statement at all, Kamiuchi-kun.”

“Uhe… don’t be like this, Kaichou!”

“Well, Daiya is the one I can trust the least, though.”

Daiya answers with a cynical smile to the chairman’s reaction on his sarcasm earlier.

Then he says,

“Yeah. Since I would kill for my own sake.”

He makes a statement that makes everyone his enemy, coolly.

▶First Day <C> [Kazuki Hoshino]‘s room

«Your [class] is [Sorcerer].»

I notice this message on the monitor immediately when I return to my room.

Certainly, [Sorcerer] was the only [class] that has no enemy among those six.

“…fuu”

I breathe out in relief.

Our goal is to prevent [Kingdom Royale] from starting. But it’s still very reassuring to know that I don’t have a real enemy.

“…mh?”

A message is displayed on the bottom of the monitor.

«No target has been selected for [Murder] yet.»

–[Murder]. The command with which the [King] can select someone he wants to kill.

I guess if the [King] selects a target for [Murder], the command to use [Sorcery]–in other words the command to kill someone–will be displayed there.

I don’t want to think about it. Neither about the situation in which someone tries to kill someone else, nor about the situation in which I would have to press this button.

“……It’s alright, it’s alright.”

I reassure myself by murmuring so. It’s not like we will start killing each other. Because the others should also not wish for that.

At least in the early stages where we have no problems with the time limit, nothing can possibly happen.

“……”

Really?

I mustn’t forget that Daiya is among the six of us.

«Ya ya ya - Kazuki-kun - it’s tIme - for - [Secret Meeting]!»

Noitan appears out of the blue as always.

Since I got used to this, I wasn’t startled as much and raised my head to look at the monitor. As always, it was a ugly green bear which was opening and closing its mouth.

«Please - selEct a player - you wAnt to - talk tO - You can then - go to thE - room of - thIs player - for just - half an hoUr! If more - than oNe - select - a cErtain - player - the mEetings - will tAke place - from the quIckest - to the slOwest!»

Noitan disappears from the monitor and six names appear together with a corresponding photograph.

“…What happens if the one I selected also selects me?”

«Nothing - spEcial! You will - jUst have - twice as mUch - time to speAk»

Noitan answers my question only with his voice.

While gazing at the mobile terminal on the table, I ask,

“…err, can the others also see the log of our conversation during the [Secret Meeting]?”

«They cAn - not! - Only the - disCussions the ownEr - of the mobile teRminal - has heard himsElf - are logged. For exAmple - even if - somEone is in the - same plAce as you - the discUssion won’t be - saved for hIm - if he doesn’t - heAr it - But the - inFormation of who you - talKed to - in the [Secret Meeting] - will bE saved - in the lOgs - of the othErs - so be carEful»

Who should I select… well, there’s only one.

Of course, I press «Maria Otonashi»‘s button.

«Okay - Please wait - untIl everyone - has selEcted - their partNer»

I wonder who the others will select…?

…it’s just a hunch, but I think Maria won’t choose me. I’m sure she guessed that I would select her.

Therefore, she will select–Daiya.

«OkaY - it seEms everyone - has deCided - I will nOw - display who - has chOsen whom»

Noitan disappears again and names appear on the screen.

[Iroha Shindou]	->	**[Koudai Kamiuchi]**	16:20~16:50
[Yuuri Yanagi]	->	**[Iroha Shindou]**	15:40~16:10
[Daiya Oomine]	->	**[Kazuki Hoshino]**	15:40~16:10
[Kazuki Hoshino]	->	**[Maria Otonashi]**	15:00~15:30
[Koudai Kamiuchi]	->	**[Yuuri Yanagi]**	15:00~15:30
[Maria Otonashi]	->	**[Daiya Oomine]**	16:20~16:50

As expected, Maria chose Daiya.

And Daiya–

“…Ah!”

Daiya designated… me?

“Why…?”

I can’t grasp his intention. …I don’t know what he’s up to to begin with, so there’s no way I could.

But fortunately, my meeting with Maria is first.

I’m glad it wasn’t the other way around. If the [Secret Meeting] with Daiya had been before the one with Maria, I would have acted however he wanted me to. But now I can work out a strategy together with Maria.

I confirm who the others selected. Yuuri-san and Kamiuchi-kun’s selected players are plausible, but it’s a little surprising that Kaichou chose Kamiuchi-kun.

«The doOr - will opEn when - it’s tIme! If you - go throUgh - the door - you will - automAtically arrivE - at the room of - the appRopriate person - so pLEase be - at eaSe»

▶First Day <C> [Secret Meeting] with [Maria Otonashi], [Maria Otonashi]‘s room

I fear to fall down into the nothing when I step through the dark, but I arrive at a room that looks the same as mine. Its appearance is so identical that it feels to me as if my room had only turned around.

“You arrived?”

Maria is sitting on the bed with her gaze fixed on me and urges me to sit down next to her by patting the space beside her.

“We don’t have time for idle chatter, so I’ll raise the main subject right away.”

“…umm, our main subject is…?”

“How we can steal the ‘box’ from Oomine, of course. Don’t tell me you plan on properly taking part in [Kingdom Royale]?”

While sitting down next to her, I shake my head wildly.

“Our goal is the same as always: ending the ‘Game of Idleness’. Well, you can say it’s easy this time since we know the identity of the ‘owner’.”

“…But I wonder if Daiya will hand his ‘box’ over to us freely…”

Maria wrinkles her forehead at hearing my words.

“…indeed. We have no other choice but to persuade him, but…”

“…this will be no easy task?”

“Do you think it’s easy?”

I shake my head again.

Failing to persuade him would also mean that we’d also be unable to access and take his ‘box’.

If that situation arises, we’d have to crush the ‘box’–along with Daiya.

“…Say, Maria. If Daiya loses in [Kingdom Royale], do you think this will

automatically also mark the end of the ‘Game of Idleness’?”

“This depends on the nature of the ‘Game of Idleness’, so I can’t say anything definite yet… but I had many opportunities to find out about Oomine’s personality thanks to the ‘Rejecting Classroom’. Having watched him for a long time there, I think, since for everyone defeat means death, Oomine’s defeat at his own game will have just the same result. Don’t you think so, too?”

I nod. We can’t say for sure while we still don’t know what his goal is yet… but it’s hardly reasonable that someone as prideful as Daiya would be the only one not obeying the rules.

“……Say,”

Maria looks into my eyes while I am absorbed in thought.

“Do you… wish for Oomine’s death?”

“Huh?”

Maria gazes at me with an expression that seems composed as ever, but there is faint anxiety mixed into it.

…Certainly, my question just now might have sounded like a proposal to kill Daiya.

“I don’t! I would never wish for Daiya’s death.”

“…I see.”

The origin of the smile that accompany those words is obviously relief.

…right. There’s no way Maria would wish to use such a method.

“Getting out of here by Daiya dying; that’s no solution!”

“Right. Just as you say.”

“Well, I may say that, but I still don’t know what to do, though…”

When I murmur so, Maria starts to speak with a frown.

“……I’m reluctant to propose this, but listen. We may need to… ask the others, except for Oomine, for help, especially Shindou. If we could all arrive at the same opinion, we would have nothing to fear of [Kingdom Royale].”

“…What do you mean?”

“If we could get them to believe the concept of the ‘boxes’ and the fact that Oomine’s the ‘owner’, we could make clear who’s the enemy of everyone. We could avert the worst case where nobody knows who might kill whom.

[Kingdom Royale] is a game that does not start as long we don’t distrust each other.”

“…But it’s difficult to get them to know about the ‘box’, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, exactly. Even just telling them about the ‘box’ is very hard in the current situation, where any remarkable action is directly connected with risk.”

“Yeah… I can very well understand that you’re reluctant!”

“…I’m not reluctant because it’s hard to execute.”

“Eh?”

“Do you not understand? Tell them who’s the ‘owner’; Tell them that their enemy is Daiya Oomine. But if you do so, everyone will know that they would be released when Oomine dies. And don’t forget that we can kill others by pressing a single button in here.”

I hold my breath.

“Oomine is not someone who can be easily persuaded. I don’t think he would stop the ‘Game of Idleness’ even if Shindou and the others found out about the truth. But how would the others react to that behavior? Would everyone patiently wait until he changes his mind, in an environment with limited time, where they could get killed at any time? I think they wouldn’t. If we entered a standstill, probably–”

Maria hisses bitterly.

“–Shindou would kill Oomine.”

“No w–”

I take a deep breath and continue.

“No way… D-Didn’t Kaichou say it herself? She would not be able to kill.”

“Did this statement calm your mind?”

“…Do you think it was a lie, Maria?”

“I don’t know whether it’s a lie or not. However, Shindou would be all the more dangerous if she’s telling the truth.”

“W-Why so…?”

Maria stands up silently, takes the portable terminal on the table and begins controlling it. Then she replays a recorded voice file.

«Eventually I would not be able to carry this sin on my shoulders and I’d

destroy my life. So I could never do it, as I'm able to imagine this much.»

"Do you see the risk in this statement?"

I shake my head.

"Shindou's saying that –she can kill if she's prepared to ruin her own life."

This sounds a bit like an over-interpretation, but… it is indeed possible to perceive it this way, I suppose?

"B-But you don't easily become prepared to ruin your own life unless there's a strong reason!"

"You really think there is no such reason? I can name some right off the bat. Let's see… for example, would saving Yanagi not be a strong reason to her?"

She said plainly, making me fall into silence. This is indeed one motive that would make that Kaichou cross the last line.

Right, this is no everyday life after all. It's an abnormality that was distorted by the 'box'. There can be any amount of strong reasons.

"Kazuki, you should know it already, but I cannot kill anyone, whatever reason there might be."

"Yeah, I know."

"I do think it's the same for you. Can you tell me the reason for this as instantly as Shindou did?"

I start thinking when she asks so.

Why can I not kill?

–Because it's haughty to think it's okay for one to kill others?

–Because I pity the other?

–Because my ethics don't permit it?

I can think of some, but none of them feel quite right. I think none of them are wrong, but they don't seem right either. These are all subsequent reasons that follow the fact that I cannot do it.

"Nothing comes to mind…?"

"…yeah."

I answer with a dropped gaze.

"That's how it should be."

"Eh?"

“What Shindou said about imagination and such is not right. Someone that really can’t kill others has no reason. You and I–we simply cannot kill.”

…Right. Exactly. This feels the most natural.

“It is unnatural when you are able to find a reason why you can’t kill, and can tell others smoothly. Shindou merely tried to make us believe she’s not dangerous. Well, but this is still way more wholesome than Oomine’s showcasing of his enmity.”

“I wonder why Daiya behaves like this, although he’s in a dangerous position…”

“Well, he wouldn’t sound very convincing if he said «I would never harm a fly» like Shindou and the others, considering his usual attitude. Viewed from such an angle, his personality might be surprisingly disadvantageous for [Kingdom Royale].”

…indeed, as it looks now, his life is the most threatened.

On the other hand, Yuuri-san might be surprisingly in the safest position.

“Ah, right. I was wondering: is the ‘Game of Idleness’ an internal or an external ‘box’?”

Maria’s gaze became sharper upon hearing this question.

“S-Sorry. I wasn’t thinking. R-Right, such an insane ‘box’ has to be an internal–”

“It’s an external ‘box’.”

“…Huh?”

“The ‘Game of Idleness’ is an external ‘box’, and it gets a score of around 5 even.”

The ‘Sevennight in Mud’ had an external level of 4 if I remember correctly, which means that this box has a higher score despite its complexity.

But if it’s an external ‘box’–

“This means he believes in this situation to a certain extent. …perhaps, the ‘owner’ was able to master the ‘box’.”

I hold my breath. This… would be quite amazing, wouldn’t it?

“Persuading him is difficult because of this. The ‘owners’ we met until now had all more or less common sense at the point when they used their ‘box’. Because of this, their ‘wishes’ were flawed and inexact. We were able to get them to give their ‘boxes’ away by using those flaws.”

“…but there are none this time.”

Honestly speaking, I can’t believe Daiya was able to master the ‘box’. After all, Daiya is a rigorous realist. He is not suited for using a ‘box’ that makes ‘wishes’ real together with the doubts that come with it.

“Anyway, this means influence on reality is unavoidable. So the memories of what we experience in this [Kingdom Royal] are likely to remain and its outcome will also take effect in reality.”

“Ergo, if we die in the game, we will also die in reality…?”

“Yeah, think of it like this. …just for your information; not only in external, but also in internal ‘boxes’ is the impact of «death» big! That I stand here unhurt, though I died several times in the ‘Rejecting Classroom’, is only thanks to the special characteristic of that ‘box’ which made «death» itself void. If I died during the last ‘School Transfer’, the 27,756th time, I either would have really died or at least I would have suffered after-effects that correspond to death.”

“…I see.”

Anyway, in short it’s:

<u>«Death» here is equal to «death» in reality.</u>

“Therefore, we absolutely must not let [Kingdom Royale] start.”

Honestly speaking, maybe I didn’t have enough sense of danger. The light sound of the word ‘game’ and the «death» that seems to arrive by pressing a button–ultimately I thought of this unreal-seeming ‘box’ as some kind of game.

But this is wrong.

If I die by someone pressing a single button or if I kill someone; this «death» could not be reset like in a game.

“…we have not much time. Let’s first consider what you should do in the [Secret Meeting] with Oomine.”

“Okay.”

In the present situation where we can’t even see the sign of a solution, we must first do what we can do now.

“Umm, I think Daiya’s going to ask for my [class] first. What do you think?”

“I guess so. …aah, just in case, as long you don’t have a special reason, you must not tell anyone your [class].”

“Okay.”

I’m aware of the risk in this by now. But–

“But I’ll tell you, Maria. I am the [Sorcerer].”

“…What would you have done if my [class] was opposing yours?”

“Nothing in particular. I would still say it.”

“…I see. You have a point. Such a trifling matter is not something we would hide from each other.”

Maria said so and smiled. My cheeks relaxed unknowingly at seeing this smile.

Maria just called this matter, that would be life-endangering if known by others, ‘trifling’.

“By the way, my [class] is [Prince]. I would have preferred [Revolutionary], though.”

Fair enough. The [Revolutionary] is the one who’s most likely to kill someone, because he can kill on his own. But Maria would never make this mistake even if the time limit drew near.

Maria will definitely not kill anyone.

“……Ah”

I realize something when thinking so.

“What’s wrong?”

“E-Err……”

With a sidelong glance at Maria, who was gazing at me suspiciously, I thought:

–Maria is powerless in this ‘box’.

After all, this [Kingdom Royale] is a game about killing and deceiving. Maria, who’s unable of both, has no chance for victory.

Until now I was always relying on Maria in all battles revolving around the ‘boxes’. And even this time I will probably rely on her.

However–the time will definitely come when I have to do something with my very own power.

“……Never mind!”

Maria keeps looking at me with a frown after this reply.

She trusts me that I will never kill anyone. But if I realize that Maria is going to die, and I know that I can prevent this by killing someone,–

–What would I do then?

▶First Day <C> [Secret Meeting] with [Daiya Oomine], [Kazuki Hoshino]‘s room

What to do in order to withstand Daiya; In the end, we came to the conclusion that I should just keep silent.

Daiya will doubtlessly try to confuse me, so just showing him a reaction is already dangerous. Since I have no confidence in being able to avoid his plan well, I have no other choice but covering my ears.

Sitting on the bed, I greeted Daiya by raising my hand when he entered the room. Daiya looked quickly around and sat down on the table.

“Kazu, let me ask you–”

“Daiya,”

I interrupted him immediately.

“I know that we’re inside your ‘box’. I can only conclude that you considered me easy to ally with and, hence, approached me with the aim of deceiving me. Therefore, from now on, I won’t speak anymore.”

Daiya seemed surprised at seeing me form a thin line with my mouth for a moment, but his expression quickly changed to a smirk.

“What are you talking about, Kazu?”

“……”

“What’s the point of being quiet? Aren’t you eager to ask me about the ‘box’? You have to do something about the ‘box’, don’t you!”

“……”

I won’t utter another word. That’s what we’ve decided on. If I answered him by my own judgment because ‘this much should be no problem’, he would exploit this gap. He would subtly hint that ‘it’s okay to speak’ and eventually make me talk.

Therefore I won’t speak.

“…aah, so you’re passing the whole task to Otonashi, huh. It was her anyway, who told you to keep silent, right? You really aren’t even for the birds. If you’re only being silent, then even insects are superior to you as they won’t possibly talk, ever.”

I held both my hands over my ears.

“You can still hear me anyway. Hmpf, I’ll tell you something good, Kazu!”

Daiya stood up, approached me and whispered into my ear.

“This ‘box’ doesn’t originate from my ‘wish’.”

I reflexively widened my eyes upon hearing this and looked at Daiya.

Daiya raised a hearty laughter.

“Look! There you lose to insects.”

“Uh…”

Stop getting rattled, me! Or else I won’t be able to keep silent.

When he stopped laughing after a while, Daiya returned to the table. Then he focused on me and declared:

“But what I just said is true.”

…I won’t be deceived. There’s no way I’d believe him. Not even I am this softhearted.

“Well, I guess it’s impossible to force you to believe me. The inside of your head may be one big flower garden, but there’s no way you’d believe anything like a fool. But why do you think I would claim specifically this?”

Daiya raised the corner of his mouth.

“Because it’s the truth.”

…I won’t believe you. I definitely won’t believe you.

“You should know that I didn’t do anything for a while after obtaining a ‘box’. In other words, I was merely in possession of the ‘box’ without using it. Tell me, Kazu, how can you be sure that I don’t continue doing so even now?”

…this can’t be. …I’m sure it can’t.

“You don’t have to believe me. Believing me is impossible from the start after all. But still, Kazu, didn’t you think of it like that just now? I’m probably lying, but what if I’m telling the truth? If so, wouldn’t there be the need to

consider the possibility of a different ‘owner’, no matter whether I’m telling the truth or not? …hu, not something I should say, huh.”

…Damn. It’s exactly as he says.

I can’t think of it as pure nonsense. In fact, it seemed strange to me that Daiya had mastered a ‘box’. This doubt would get resolved if he’s not the ‘owner’.

If there’s another ‘owner’ besides Daiya, then he would easily be able to kill us.

Daiya effortlessly succeeded shaking me up like this.

Of course, he didn’t overlook this disturbance in me, this faint gap in my heart.

“Kazu, you are the [Sorcerer], aren’t you?”

“……Eh?”

I let out my voice spontaneously.

“H-How d-did–?”

How did he find out? I didn’t didn’t make any fault that would reveal–

Having thought this far, I noticed something.

I made a mistake –just now.

Daiya laughed pleasantly, probably because of the baffled grimace I made.

“Hahaha! I knew it from the start, but you really are too unimportant in this game, aren’t you!”

While listening to his laughter, I bit on my lips.

Although Maria advised me so kindly, I brought it all to naught. I’m completely Daiya’s poodle.

“……You’re lucky, aren’t you Daiya.”

Daiya just by chance said [Sorcerer]. The probability is 1:6 –no, 1:5, since he knows his own [class]. He just randomly named [Sorcerer] which happened to my actual [class]. …If only I had another [class], only the fact that I’m not the [Sorcerer] would have been busted…

“I’m lucky? Don’t you get why I especially asked you if you’re the [Sorcerer]?”

“…What do you mean?”

Daiya kept quiet for a while and scratched his head then.

“Well, for now let’s assume that I’m not the ‘owner’ of this ‘box’.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Shut up and listen. If it’s not mine, then this would also mean that I don’t wish for this «killer-game». Also, I wouldn’t want you, my acquaintance, to die.”

“…Yeah.”

“Therefore, I wanted to ask you if your [class] was [Sorcerer].”

“……aren’t those two statements a little disconnected?”

Daiya looked at me with awfully scorning eyes.

“Don’t tell me you think that you’re the safest because the [Sorcerer] has no enemies? If you seriously think so, then you don’t have brains in this head of yours, but shit.”

I lost my tongue because he guessed right.

“I’ll explain it to you so politely that even a monkey would understand! Firstly, it’s definitely the [Sorcerer] who has it the hardest to survive.”

“…Why? The [Sorcerer]‘s life or death is irrelevant to the victory conditions of the other [classes].”

“Even you understand that the [Revolutionary] is the most dangerous, right?”

I nodded. It doesn’t even have to be mentioned that the [Revolutionary] is the most dangerous, having the ability of killing others on his own.

“The one the [Revolutionary] wants to get rid of the most is the [Sorcerer]. You see? Only the [Knight] can actually decide whether to kill or not, apart from the [Sorcerer]. However, the victory conditions of the [Knight] and the [Revolutionary] are rather similar, thus they are likely to conspire. If the [Sorcerer] dies, the danger to the [Revolutionary] will drop dramatically.”

I took the portable terminal on the table and reread the explanation of the [classes].

…Indeed. Even if the [Revolutionary] killed the [King] who’s directly opposing him, the [Prince] and [The Double] would just take his place; So his condition wouldn’t change much. However, if the [Sorcerer] disappeared, the [Revolutionary] would immediately achieve an advantageous position.

“Hey, but that… wouldn’t that mean that the [Revolutionary] is almost sure to win if the [Sorcerer] died…?”

“It’s not that simple either. For one, some will guess the others’ [classes] wrongly and no one would readily become the ally of the [Revolutionary]. And also,–”

Daiya rummaged my jute bag and took that rough knife out.

“No matter how advantageous or disadvantageous you may become in this game, in the worst case you have this. Ha, you can survive [Kingdom Royale] anytime, you just need to have the resolution to kill others directly!”

I held my breath.

…I’m convinced now. The ‘owner’ of the ‘Game of Idleness’ is insane.

“…Kazu, let me say just this.”

Daiya said while stowing the knife away.

“You can’t persuade the ‘owner’ until the killing starts. If you want to keep damage to the minimum, you have to kill the ‘owner’. So–”

Daiya looked at me. He declared with an honest face, devoid of falsehood:

“No matter how much you struggle, it’s decided that at least one person will die because of this ‘box’.”

I shook my head slightly and murmured,

“That’s not, true–”

Daiya didn’t say anything.

In fact, even I had already noticed it long ago.

That this is the truth. Long ago.

▶First Day <D> Big room

No one was there yet when I arrived at the big room.

I recalled the [Secret Meeting] with Daiya. In the end, I exposed to him that I'm the [Sorcerer] and I even lost confidence that he's the 'owner'.

There is the need to consider together with Maria how we should proceed from now on based on this. Actually I hurried to here to meet her as fast as possible, but–and right when I thought so, she appeared from her door.

"Maria!"

She looked at me with a grave face when I called out for her and sat down in front of me.

Maria had a [Secret Meeting] with Daiya, after he finished the [Secret Meeting] with me. Judging from her expression, she might have been shaken up like I was.

"…Did something happen with Daiya?"

"……Probably the same as with you. I'm principally considering Daiya the 'owner', but now I started to take the faint possibility of someone else being the 'owner' into consideration. So it has become even less judicious to tell the others easily about the 'box'."

"Though we have no time…"

"Yeah, that's exactly what bothers me. I'd like to use this time to talk to the others about themselves for the purpose of grasping their personality, but… I myself can't talk about me. After all I can't talk about my environment without mentioning the 'boxes'."

Maria's environment, huh.

Even I know almost nothing about it. She doesn't talk about herself at all and having seen her 'Flawed Bliss', I'm far from being able to ask her.

"Maria, tell me–"

"Hi there!"

Kamiuchi-kun entered the big room and raised his hand toward us. I flashed

an awkward smile and waved back.

I shielded Maria's ear with my hand from him so that he wouldnt be able to hear my next words.

"Kazuki, you mustn't whisper. Showing them how we have secrets from them in the present state of affairs will arouse distrust in them."

"Ah, I see…"

"Don't worry about it too much, Maricchi. You're lovers after all, so it's natural you have some secrets, isn't it?"

"You may say so, but that doesn't mean that the others think so, too."

"You think so? Speaking of which, they are scary, aren't they? Especially Kaichou and Oomine-senpai."

"…Maria, were you already acquainted with Kamiuchi-kun perhaps?"

I asked so as his intimate tone bothered me.

"No, not at all."

"Whoa, isn't 'not at all' a bit too harsh? Haven't we talked several times already, before this?"

"You arbitrarily spoke to me several times, yes, but there was never a conversation."

Kamiuchi-kun shrugged his shoulders with an amazed expression.

"I only want to be healed by talking to a super beautiful girl, so there's no need to be on guard, though… It's not like I'm planning to pinch you from Hoshino-senpai, really!"

"…Listen, Kamiuchi-kun. Just so you know, Maria and I aren't really going out, you know?"

"No, it's too late for such restraint or modesty or whatever now."

He doesn't believe me, as expected.

While we were having this talk, everyone gathered in the big room. We sat down on our seats on Kaichou's instruction.

"Alright, has anyone thought of a way to get out of [Kingdom Royale]?"

After she said this at the very beginning, Kaichou crossed her arms and waited with a smile for an opinion.

I stole a glance at Daiya; He was looking in another direction as if he wasn't

even listening to our conversation.

If the three people who know about the ‘box’ aren’t saying anything, no one will say anything. –was what I was certain of, but an unexpected person raised her hand timidly.

“Oh, Yuuri, do you know anything?”

“Umm, it’s not a way to get out, but a way to restrain it… if you, don’t mind?”

“Ooh, nice! Tell us your opinion with no worries!”

Urged by Kaichou, Yuuri-san nodded slightly.

“Uumm… I think we all agree that suspicion will worsen our situation. This guess of mine isn’t wrong, is it?”

After confirming that we nodded, Yuuri-san continued.

“We don’t know who has which [class]. We don’t know who our enemies in this game are. I believe this is what leads to anxiety. Nobody wants to let the game proceed, right, everyone? So, why don’t we just count to three and reveal our [classes]?”

Everyone was quite surprised at this bold proposal that was contrastive to the fainthearted tone that lied in her voice.

Yuuri-san faltered a little on seeing this reaction of ours, but bravely opened her mouth again.

“If we do so, no one will be able to jump the gun anymore. I think we will be able to trust everyone. It’s also impossible to lie since we’ll all say it at once. So if two named the same [class], we would know that one of them is lying. What… do you think?”

“Aah, Yuuri-chan you’re brilliant! This is definitely the way to go!”

Upon receiving Kamiuchi-kun’s high praise, Yuuri-san smiled bashfully and turned red.

“Further, we can only do this when all six people are present. Because it would become possible to lie if only one person was missing. …ah, ‘missing’ sounds ominous, doesn’t it, I’m sorry.”

Yeah, worth trying… I think. But I can’t approve lightly. There might be something I’m overlooking.

Maria should be thinking the same. After thinking for a while with crossed arms, she opened her mouth and said,

“I’m for it.”

Even Maria did not find a catch? Then there’s no problem.

I was about to approve right away, when–

“Hmpf”

Daiya sneered scornfully.

Yuuri-san made a mixed expression of disturbance and fright on seeing his reaction.

“…you don’t like it, Daiya-san?”

“I don’t like it at all.”

“Please forgive me if my consideration was insufficient… may I ask for the reason, though?”

“I don’t like how you play the good girl.”

Yuuri-san widened her eyes and grew stiff to those unexpected words.

“What’s that grimace? Are your ears made to only hear words that are convenient for you or what? I just told you that I don’t feel like obeying you since I hate you, you fucking bitch.”

Tears were welling up in Yuuri-san’s eyes.

“Oomine-senpai. Aren’t you getting carried away? Please apologize to Yuuri-chan.”

“Hah? I should apologize? I’d rather expect the others to thank me! Guys, I’m disclosing to you that she’s a coward. Right, Yanagi?”

Yuuri-san’s shoulders twitched; she was on the verge of crying already.

“A-A coward? I am? Why…?”

“So let me ask: are you either the [Revolutionary] or the [Sorcerer]?”

Yuuri-san turned pale at once.

“No, you’re not, are you?”

“…W-Why, do you–”

“In truth you know it. You know that the risk of a coming-out varies vastly between the single [classes]. Thus, you are none of the two comparatively endangered [classes]. I judged that you are a [class] that is relatively safe. How is it?”

She already seemed pitiful, but her pale face was still turning whiter.

“Such a wicked girl as yourself proposed this only for your own sake and not for improving the situation anyway, right?”

At last she started to shed tears after hearing this ill-will.

“Oi oi, do you think we’ll forgive your deceit when you cry? Whoa, girls’ tears are really convenient, aren’t they? Being such a bitch, you can make them flow like a water tap anyway, right?”

“Cruel… this is just cruel of you…”

“You merely wanted to quickly know who has the dangerous [classes] - in order to survive.”

“No… that’s… I only, didn’t want a killing to start, so, uuuuu…”

Yuuri-san was unable to stop her continuously flowing tears and dropped her gaze.

…indeed, Yuuri-san seems timid, so she might have not made this risky proposal if she was the [Revolutionary] or the [Sorcerer].

But still, she proposed this after thinking with all her might to improve the situation. Those remarks are indeed too cruel. As it seems, Kamiuchi-kun seemed to have similar thoughts; he was scowling at Daiya with such a might that it wouldn’t be surprising if he attacked him right away.

“Didn’t you just not want to say it because you’re the [Revolutionary]? Sorry, Senpai, but if you really are the [Revolutionary], I honestly don’t plan to let you act as you please, you know?”

“I see, so I’m the [Revolutionary], huh. I shall [assassinate] you in the next <E>-block, then.”

Kamiuchi-kun seemed overwhelmed by Daiya who spoke clearly more ill-willed words than he had, and simply lost his tongue. He lost the will to counter and just screwed up his mouth.

“In the first place, I wouldn’t need to object anyway! Right, Kaichou-san?”

Yuuri-san raised her tear-stained face to look at Kaichou. Kaichou showed her a wry smile and stated,

“…Well, yeah. Sorry Yuuri, but I’m basically also against it.”

“W, hy…?”

“Certainly, there is a gain as you mentioned. However, the downside is bigger. For example, would we be able to keep cool if we knew that Oomine-kun, who’s been acting like a jerk now, was the [Revolutionary]? In the worst case, wouldn’t our suspicions increase further?”

“Well…”

“I’m also sure Oomine-kun would start to operate if that happened. He might try to get us under his control by highlighting his own power… There are several other downsides I can think of. Therefore, I’m against it in principle.”

“……I see.”

Yuuri-san became downcast when her proposal was even rejected by her friend.

“Right, an idiot like me should better keep silent… everyone, I’m sorry for upsetting you.”

Another teardrop fell down from her eye.

“Y-Yuuri-san, please don’t say that! I think it’s a great idea, you know? And look; didn’t even Maria approve of it?”

“…Hoshino-san.”

I have to admit this was a pretty clumsy encouragement, but Yuuri-san smiled faintly at me anyhow.

“Come to think of it, why do you approve of this proposal, Otonashi-san?”

Kaichou asked Maria.

“Because I believe mutual understanding is more important than anything. As long we can’t even reveal our [classes] to the others, nobody is going to be fully honest, am I wrong? I for one don’t think something of that extent would cause us to assault each other. So what’s your take on that?”

“Isn’t this because you lack the sentiment of fear? We aren’t all as strong as you, you know? I’m frightened, to be honest.”

“Doesn’t look like it.”

“Because I’m making sure it doesn’t look like it. Since everyone is going to take advantage of any weak spot I show… oh, it’s no use acting cool if I blurt this out, is it?”

She said composedly. …yeah, I also believe it’s a lie that she’s frightened.

“You have a point with claiming that it’s necessary to reveal our [classes] in order to understand each other. But it’s obviously too early for this as the situation is too uncertain right now.”

“But it will be too late when the first corpse appears.”

“Right. We ought to clear up the matter as soon as possible…”

She murmured and pursed her lips. Kaichou's habit when she thinks.

"Well, let's refrain from it today at least. Nobody is going to die on the first day after all, I think."

In the end, no one had a better proposal than Yuuri-san.

Of course we kept chatting with each other for better mutual understanding, but the time passed by without us finding anything to improve the state of affairs.

«It is - tiMe! - If you - don't reTurn - you are - going to - dIe!»

It was exactly «20:00» when I looked at my watch after hearing Noitan's announcement. The end of the <D>-block.

Daiya had quickly returned to his room, and Kaichou and Kamiuchi-kun were in the process of heading to their door.

Okay then, I had better return quickly as well.

When I was about to pass through the door, somebody grasped my sleeve.

"What, Maria?"

I turned around.

Not Maria, but Yuuri-san was standing there with wide eyes. I noticed my misunderstanding and turned red. Seeing me like this, she narrowed her eyes and formed a tender smile.

"E-Err… what's the matter, Yuuri-san?"

"Mh. I would like to express my thanks to you."

"…? Thanks for…?"

Yuuri-san seemed even more pleased when I tilted my head in wonderment.

"You don't understand right away, which means… you weren't deliberately kind to me to make me your ally…"

"…Eh?"

"Ah, no, never mind. …do you really not understand? Look, didn't you cheer me up when I cried?"

"…Ah… that."

"So again, thank you."

Yuuri-san bowed deeply, whereupon I hurriedly replied,

“D-Don’t… it’s not like I did something great, really.”

“But it helped me very much, you know?”

“T-That’s… fortunate then…”

It was pretty embarrassing to be thanked formally like this.

Yuuri-san was smiling for some reason at my reddened face.

“…I have the feeling that it’s okay to believe you even in this game.”

“Eh?”

She seemed to hesitate a little, but eventually she readied herself and looked right into my eyes.

“If we trust each other, nobody will kill anyone. I believe so. …Hoshino-san. Do you think I’m being too naïve?”

I shook my head vigorously to answer her persistent gaze.

“Not at all! I believe so, too.”

“For real?”

She unknowingly grasped my right hand with both her hands in overwhelming joy, or so it looked to me. My face turned even hotter when I felt this warm, soft sensation.

“I think we would absolutely not lose to such a game if we all connected our hands and trusted each other. Therefore, let’s first have mutual trust between ourselves.”

“Y-Yeah…”

I was unable to look directly at her carefree smile and dropped my gaze reflexively.

Yuuri-san is, despite being an upperclassman… um, really cute.

“Kazuki.”

I looked up as I was called by someone. Maria was watching us expressionlessly. …I recently realized that she frequently shows this face when she’s in a bad mood.

“The time’s getting risky. Return quickly.”

“Ah, yeah…”

Yuuri-san comprehended me when I looked at her and let go of my hand. Her expression seemed a little lonely to me.

“Yanagi, you should consider the time as well.”

“Y-Yes…”

Yuuri-san was still frightened of Maria.

“…Um, Yuuri-san. It’s okay, you can trust Maria!”

“Ah, yes. If you say so, Hoshino-san…”

“So, we have to go back to our respective rooms.”

“Yes, you’re right. …ah, one more thing.”

With these words, she brought her lips to my ear.

“I’ll come to your place for a [Secret Meeting] tomorrow.”

She whispered into my ear. Her breath touched my ear.

Yuuri-san danced away with small steps and disappeared beyond her door with a prankish smile.

I stared dumbfounded in the direction she disappeared in.

“…hmph.”

Maria sneered ill-humoredly and disappeared beyond her door as well.

Left behind alone in the big room, I recalled her name.

«Yuuri Yanagi»

«Yanagi-san»

“……they resemble, I think.”

Their faces don’t. But I had the feeling that this prankish smile at the end resembled–her.

Resembled the other «Yanagi» I know.

Her, who I’m unlikely to meet ever again.

▶First Day <E> [Kazuki Hoshino]‘s room

«[Yuuri Yanagi] was strangulated by [Assassination]»

Those letters were displayed on the monitor in my room.

As I was unable to comprehend those words, I couldn’t show any reaction. I just kept rereading this message over and over.

She died?

Yuuri-san, died…?

“……what is this nonsense?”

I murmured unknowingly and couldn’t suppress a small laugh.

I mean, didn’t everybody say it?

That nobody is going to die on the first day. That it’s going to be okay. They said so.

Yeah, they sure did! Tell me, someone… they said so, didn’t they!?

«Yaa yaa yaa»

Those incomprehensible letters disappeared from the monitor and the green bear appeared instead.

«What a piTy - Yuuri-chan - dieD!»

“Don’t lie!!”

I roared reflexively at Noitan.

« - Lie?»

At that very moment–

Noitan’s graphic changed to one I had not seen yet. He opened his mouth to the verge of ripping.

«UHYAHYAHYAHYAHYAHYAHYA - Lie? - If only it was a lie, right? - But

you know? - She's dead! - She was strangulated, so she died with her eyes popping out - her face turning all purple - and excreting piss and shit! - She died with a groooss visage and stank like hell, though she was so cute before!»

I always thought he's disgusting.

But this was the first time I felt hatred against him.

This is probably the true nature of Noitan–no, of the 'box'. The true nature of that dirty, hopeless, pathetic 'wish'.

«Too bad, isn't it? - You were so close to getting intimate with her - You could have had gotten between the blankets together with her if all went well - It really is too bad she died, isn't it!! - UHYAHYAHYAHYAHYAHYAHYAHYAHYAHYAHYAHYAHYAHYA

I covered my ears because of his guffaw.

I will absolutely not admit such a 'wish'. The circumstances of the 'owner' don't matter to me. I don't care if there's a gap or not. I will absolutely not admit this, no matter what reason he may have had.

«UHYAHYAHYAHYAHYAHYAHYAHYAHYAHYAHYAHYA»

Therefore, this guy is my enemy.

"……show me the proof!"

«Mh?»

Noitan's mouth returned to normal.

"Show me the proof that Yuuri-san's dead! If you don't, I won't believe it."

«The proof -hUh»

"Right! This is a lie anyway, so you won't–"

«Okay!»

Noitan disappeared. At the same moment, the door opened.

"…what…!"

The usual dark was hanging beyond the door.

I stood before the darkness and swallowed my saliva. I started to get doubts. What if Noitan was telling nothing but the truth and the «proof» that awaits me there is–

Even so, I have to go through the door–go through the dark.

I jumped through the door.

In the center of the mirror-inverted prison-like room was – it.

“Ah”

Yuuri Yanagi’s – «XXXXX»

“A, Aah”

This was the perfect proof.

This made me realize. Realize reality.

Although I understood what this is, I failed at connecting it. I failed at connecting this with the appearance of that lovely girl.

I may have been unable to connect these remnants with her, but this terrible spectacle in itself broke my heart.

I lost control of my body while screaming and crumbled down. When I crumbled down, the distance between me and the «XXXXX» decreased. What once was supposed to be her lovely face, was now–

“–ugh, ghu”

A purple visage so ugly it made me almost forget sympathy.

Yeah, there was no lie or exaggeration in Noitan’s explanation. She was there in the exact same state as Noitan had said.

Then, I finally managed to recognize it clearly.

Yuuri Yanagi died.

I was again unable to save «Yanagi-san»

–like this, [Kingdom Royale] started
with the death of the girl that claimed everything would go alright if we just connected our hands.

- [Yuuri Yanagi], death by [Assassination]

▶Second Day <B> Big room

A jute bag was blatantly placed on the table in the big room.

Its contents were almost the same as of the one in my room. The only difference was that the digital watch wasn't blue, but beige. Her portable terminal had become unusable.

There were also six portions of solid food. In other words, if someone else died, you could steal their food and extend your time limit. It probably was just another system to provoke murder.

It disgusted me.

We were all just sitting silently on our seats and gazed at the jute bag.

Next to me, Daiya was wiping the blood around his mouth away. He had been hit by Kamiuchi-kun shortly after the <B>-block started. Kamiuchi-kun firmly believed that the [Revolutionary]–the one that killed Yuuri-san–was Daiya.

"…at least he didn't use the knife."

Kaichou, who had stopped Kamiuchi-kun's rampage together with Maria, whispered so to Daiya.

–It wouldn't be strange for anyone else to start killing as well.

"People, let's calm down and go over it again. First a confirmation: The [Revolutionary] killed Yuuri. He killed such a kind girl. Furthermore, the culprit is among us. There's no doubt about that."

At first glance, she seemed as calm as yesterday, but her expression looked forced somehow and had lost its composure.

And her gaze was almost abnormally sharp.

"Our goal is to get out of [Kingdom Royale]. But now we have a second goal. That is, to find and kill the [Revolutionary]. That's OK, isn't it?"

"Wait, Shindou. What are you deciding there on your own accord?"

"Otonashi-san. Sorry, but I don't accept objections on that matter. Should I explain the reason to you? Firstly, we're going to get killed by him if we keep

doing nothing. Secondly, it’s safe to assume that he’s the wirepuller or his accomplice, as he committed murder at this point in time. Thirdly, I won’t be satisfied until he gets what he deserves.”

“You said that you would ruin your life by killing someone. So, in other words, you’re now prepared to ruin your own life, right?”

Maria asked. Kaichou was at a loss for words for a moment. But nonetheless she answered fluently,

“I don’t know. But I just can’t forgive him for killing Yuuri in such a gruesome way.”

“……I see.”

She probably judged that it was impossible and unnatural to persuade her there and then. Maria closed her mouth.

“Our goals are set. Or does someone want to add something?”

Kaichou looked at us, who were sitting there silently.

“Nothing? Okay, then let me express my opinion on–”

She stopped her words and widened her eyes, seeming surprised.

Daiya, who had not properly taken part in our conversation so far, had raised his hand.

“Do you want to say anything?”

“Yeah. …well, I’ll be silent if you have no interest in the suspect’s words.”

“I won’t say that. …But what kind of twist is this? Weren’t you silent until now?”

“There’s no way I could keep quiet when I’m without doubt the next who’s going to be killed, with the way things are going now.”

“Well, that’s not surprising now, is it?”

Kamiuchi-kun sneered at this exchange of words.

“Suit yourself. But whatever you say, I won’t change my mind, so every word of yours will just be noise to me, you know?”

“I don’t care.”

Daiya spat this out and turned his gaze to Kaichou.

“A question: Why did the [Revolutionary] choose Yuuri Yanagi?”

“Actually I’ve been wondering about that, too.”

Kamiuchi-kun snapped at Kaichou, who had said so with a light frown.

“What are you saying, Senpais? Isn’t that all the same? Do we really need to know more than that a certain somebody, who is the [Revolutionary], is a bastard that deserves being killed?”

“…Kamiuchi, would you kill Yanagi first if you were the [Revolutionary] and had to kill someone?”

“Could a piece of trash like you please refrain from talking to me? The only reason that I’m sitting here obediently is because you’re going to get killed soon by [Sorcery] anyway!”

“Hah… you can’t even comprehend human language, huh.”

Daiya shrugged his shoulders exaggeratedly.

“What do you think, Kaichou? Would you want to kill Yanagi first?”

“…Not if I wanted to survive. To be frank, the first I would want to get rid of is you, Oomine-kun. While I think it’s possible that Otonashi-san or I are targeted, I don’t think anyone would want to eliminate Yuuri right away.”

“Right? Or perhaps the [Revolutionary] found out that Yanagi was the [Sorcerer] and… well, that’s impossible because yesterday I exposed that she’s not.”

Kaichou asked slightly irritated,

“OK, I get your point. So what?”

“In short, the aim of the [Revolutionary] was to provoke this situation.”

I didn’t understand his point. But the others got it right away. At once, there was an absolute silence in the room.

“…Haha”

Kamiuchi-kun’s sneer was what broke this silence.

“Sorry, but I have no clue what you’re talking about. Why would he need to make such a detour? If he wanted to kill you, he would just need to [assassinate] you, right? But the [Revolutionary] didn’t do that, so isn’t that proof that you’re the [Revolutionary] yourself?”

“Don’t you get that he might be suspected of being the [Revolutionary] if I died?”

Kamiuchi-kun widened his eyes and was at a loss for words. Kaichou opened her mouth instead.

“By seeming like the [Revolutionary], you act as his scapegoat–that’s what

you want to say, right, Oomine-kun? But can you prove that it's not just a lie you thought of in order to save your skin?"

"If I were the [Revolutionary], I would have had no reason to kill Yanagi first."

"Isn't this the same for every one of us?"

"Not necessarily."

Daiya took his portable terminal out of his pocket and replayed a voice.

«–So, why don't we just count to three and reveal our [classes]?»

"Yanagi wanted to unveil the [classes]. Maybe she wanted to avert distrust more than anyone. If so, it's highly probable that Yuuri Yanagi had already revealed her [class] to someone she trusted."

Both Kaichou and Kamiuchi-kun kept quiet.

"So? I wonder what the two that had a [Secret Meeting] with Yuuri Yanagi yesterday have to say?"

Suddenly, I recalled that Yuuri-san had planned to have a [Secret Meeting] with me.

If we really had this [Secret Meeting] today, she probably would've told me her [class].

But–That's right.

Of course she had more trust in Kaichou than in me, who she had met only recently. So why should she even tell me about her [class] before telling Kaichou?

"…but even if I found out about Yuuri's [class], how does that make me want to kill her straight away?"

"Oh, is the sagacious Mrs. Student Council President unable to figure out something of this degree? …huhuhu, I'll let you know, then! The reason is… to steal Yanagi's [class]."

…There was no such rule in the explanation of [Kingdom Royale].

Unable to comprehend, I listened to Daiya closely.

"He wants to make the others believe I'm the [Revolutionary]. Of course he has to pretend being another [class] as he's the real [Revolutionary]. But if he simply claimed to be Yanagi's [class], the other players are unlikely to see through him. Dead men tell no tales, after all. Even if we did a coming-out now, he could simply use Yanagi's [class]."

Everyone kept quiet and waited for Daiya to continue.

But I still didn't get it. Was that reason enough to kill her first?

"Shall I simulate it for you? First, he takes advantage of the fact that he can claim to be Yanagi's [class] and suggests a coming-out. The victory conditions for the [Revolutionary] are to kill the [King], the [Prince] and [The Double]. …hm, Yanagi was probably either the [Prince] or [The Double]."

"…how can you narrow it down this much?"

Kamiuchi-kun asked with a sour look.

"If the [King] gets killed, [The Double] will know because [Murder] becomes usable. Therefore, he would not be able to pretend being the [King] in front of [The Double]."

"But there's still the [Knight]!"

"If she were the [Knight], it would have been more beneficial to use Yanagi instead of killing her. And I don't even need to mention why she can't be the [Revolutionary] or the [Sorcerer], right?"

"……"

"The [Revolutionary] only needs to kill two more in order to win, since he has already killed Yanagi. As long everyone believes I am the [Revolutionary], he is unlikely to be targeted by the others. If he succeeds at finding out the others' [classes], he will know who he needs to kill. I could go into detail but… that would be tiresome so I won't."

Daiya continued with a light smile,

"But you realize that it's a huge advantage for him if he can make me appear to be the [Revolutionary], right? The way things are he's almost certain to win."

Having said so, Daiya–

–<u>scowled at Iroha Shindou</u>.

"I bet he was rejoicing mentally until before. To him, others are brainless pieces of shit that merely act as his foil anyway. He'd gladly kill those pieces of shit if he can survive by doing so. …geez, how impertinent."

He sneered and declared,

"<u>While being such a fool as to make me his enemy.</u>"

"……"

A certain thought crossed my mind.

Just because I hadn't taken part in the conversation, still being in shock from Yuuri's death, I noticed.

–What's happening here?

Snarling at each other, hating, doubting - what is this explosive situation? Isn't this exactly the situation we assumed would be the start of [Kingdom Royale]?

That's not good. That's not good at all! I mean, this would mean things are going just as planned. – Just as the 'owner' of the 'Game of Idleness' planned!

If it goes on like this, we will kill each other and our lives will end.

That worst case has to be averted. For that purpose, we surely have to figure out the 'owner'. We have to unite. …and yet–

"Cut it out already, Oomine-kun."

Kaichou's voice seemed completely different now.

Insuppressible anger and hatred contorted Kaichou's face.

"I'm amazed at how you can talk such baseless bullshit, full of confidence. Look down on people as you please, but I have no idea what kind of confidence you have to show such an attitude. If it's about grades at school, Otonashi-san's better. If it's about physical strength, Kamiuchi-kun is better. If it's about being trusted, Hoshino-kun's better. If it's about charm, Yuuri's better. Tell me, is there any area where you don't lose to someone else among us? Apart from the talent for hair-splitting, of course."

She flashed a deprecative smile, almost like Daiya.

"You're not better than those low-lives that take their anger out on others, unable to accept reality. No… you actually committed murder, so you're even below them."

Daiya reacted just with a smile similar to Kaichou's. She wasn't even trying to hide her aversion anymore.

"We don't live in a soft world where the others avoid you when you appear smart… because of a pathetic misunderstanding, you made a mistake where you won't get off with 'youthful indiscretion'. You killed Yuuri. …haven't you noticed yet? It's the end for you! An incapable, powerless, useless guy like you will be easily crushed like an ant."

She continued with an inappropriately soft voice,

"I'm already perceiving you as my enemy, you know? I'm going to give it my

all to crush you! Hey, I'm saying that–I'm going to kill you, do you get it?"

"So what?"

"……right, let's give you a leg up. First, I'll reveal that your delusions are nothing more than that, delusions! You claimed that Yuuri was either [The Double] or the [Prince]. But that is wrong. You overlooked something obvious. The [King] would know of the death of [The Double] because he would become unable to use [Substitution]. Uwaa, what a beginner's mistake! Which means that Yuuri's [class] could only be [Prince] if the [Revolutionary] wanted to fake his [class]."

I looked at Maria after hearing this. Maria, who was the [Prince], was just silently looking at the argument between those two.

"I'll confess! I knew Yuuri's [class]. Isn't that great, Oomine-kun? At least this hypothesis of yours was right. But listen, it was not [Prince]. Which means that the [Prince] is among us now. Hey, [Prince]-sama, you already know that these are only Oomine-kun's delusions, right?"

Daiya kept just quiet, apparently unable to object.

"Besides, if you were the [King] or [The Double], you would have surely noticed this, so you can't be one of those two [classes]. Well now, what [classes] remain?"

The remaining ones were [Knight] and [Revolutionary]. Daiya's [class] was narrowed down this far by Kaichou.

However, Daiya, who had been silent until now, started ridiculing her now.

"You go this far just to make me the bad guy? You sure are desperate."

"What?"

"I'm amazed at how you can boast this much just because you found a loophole in my hypothesis. I'm not the real [Revolutionary], so it's logical that I can only make assumptions. With your blether you merely demonstrated your hazardous human nature. I can construct as many new hypotheses as you want! Then you can delight in objecting to your heart's content, uselessly."

"Quit these desperate bluffs! Or else I'll slowly get angry because you're going too far with your poorness."

Seeing this sword-fight-like discussion before my very eyes, I thought:

–it really is too late.

[Kingdom Royale] became unstoppable the moment the first corpse appeared, the moment Yuuri-san was killed.

But… I can’t accept that.

Yuuri-san said we’d be OK if we just trusted each other. And now her corpse is the reason why we cannot trust each other anymore. I can’t accept such a horrible outcome.

The thought was so mortifying that tears overflowed my eyes. Kaichou noticed this and looked at me with wide eyes. A delicate arm was laid around my neck while I was desperately suppressing my tears.

Long hair clung to my cheeks and stopped my tears.

“……It’s alright, Kazuki.”

But I already knew. Those words of Maria lacked foundation.

“Hoshino-kun.”

Kaichou called my name.

“I like this kind nature of yours.”

Kaichou continued with a soft voice as to comfort a child,

“But I won’t let your kindness get in my way, got it?”

Those words were more than enough to make me realize that there wouldn’t be peace anymore.

▶Second Day <C> [Kazuki Hoshino]‘s room

«No target has been selected for [Murder] yet.»

The times when I could feel relieved by just this had passed.

I didn’t know who was able to use [Murder]. But this person would certainly select someone.

He would urge me to kill that player.

«Well well well - it’s abOut time - for the - [Secret Meeting]! - Please sElect - the player - you want to hAve - a [Secret Meeting] wIth»

I immediately touched the spot on the screen where «Maria Otonashi» was written.

«Please wait - untiL everyone - has selEcted - their partNer»

After a clearly longer while than last time, the [Secret Meeting] pairs were displayed. …Maybe someone chose later on purpose to adjust the order.

[Iroha Shindou]	->	**[Kazuki Hoshino]**	15:40~16:10
~~[Yuuri Yanagi]~~	dead		
[Daiya Oomine]	->	**[Kazuki Hoshino]**	16:20~16:50
[Kazuki Hoshino]	->	**[Maria Otonashi]**	15:00~15:30
[Koudai Kamiuchi]	->	**[Daiya Oomine]**	15:00~15:30
[Maria Otonashi]	->	**[Iroha Shindou]**	16:20~16:50

“……”

So this time Daiya and Kaichou designated me. Daiya aside, why did Kaichou select me?

I suppose Daiya is both the [Revolutionary] and the ‘owner’ of the ‘Game of Idleness’. After all, I can’t believe there would be another ‘owner’ so conveniently.

…But if Daiya was neither the [Revolutionary] nor the ‘owner’, then it would almost certainly be Kaichou.

Those two suspects are going to meet me.

I recalled their argument at the big room and cringed. For me it’s absolutely impossible to persist against them.

I waited for the time to meet Maria while holding my head.

▶Second Day <C> [Secret Meeting] with [Maria Otonashi], [Maria Otonashi]‘s room

Maria was sitting on her bed with crossed arms and a frown.

As soon as I sat down next to her, she immediately started to speak.

“Kazuki, we must not permit another casualty after Yanagi. You are aware of that, right?”

“Yeah.”

“This has, however, become extremely difficult. If we don’t do anything, the [Revolutionary] will definitely kill another one. …We have to break this cycle somehow.”

“What should we do…?”

When I asked this, Maria clenched her teeth once and declared,

“We will tell Shindou everything about the ‘Game of Idleness’.”

“Eh…?”

Couldn’t Kaichou be the ‘owner’ as well?

“I understand your concern. But we can no longer avoid all risks. …this will probably put you in danger, but please forgive me.”

“……could it be that I was the reason why you didn’t tell them about the ‘box’?”

“What other reason could there be?”

Maria raised a brow, wondering.

…I had scruples about this thinking of hers… but since it wasn’t the right time to say this, I asked:

“Err… we’re going to tell Kaichou about the ‘box’, so that means that we’re acting with the assumption that Daiya’s the ‘owner’ of the ‘Game of

Idleness', right?"

"Well, yeah."

"I'll assume Kaichou believed the story about the 'box' with this example now, okay? If so, I guess the present Kaichou would… probably kill Daiya…?"

Maria grimaced.

"……Yeah, you're probably right. But it is absolutely necessary to show Shindou and Kamiuchi that there's also another way out of here than winning in [Kingdom Royale]. To hold them back from killing Oomine, I will also have to clearly convey my will to them. …this will be hard indeed."

"…Ah, but if Daiya's the 'owner', Kaichou can hardly be the [Revolutionary], and she can't do anything about Daiya by using [Murder]. As the [Sorcerer] I have a veto after all. Everything's OK as long I don't press the button."

"Why can't Shindou be the [Revolutionary] if Oomine's the 'owner'?"

"Eh…? No, I mean, if she's not interested in starting [Kingdom Royale], what would be the motive to kill Yuuri-san…?"

Maria didn't nod to this logical reasoning.

"Oomine has said something about there not being a reason to kill Yanagi… but can't you think of it like this: taking the lead in the game does not matter to the [Revolutionary]. He merely always hated Yanagi; enough to kill her. Therefore, he took advantage of this situation, in which murder gets justified, and executed it on an impulse."

"Eh…?"

First I thought this was another one of her jokes that doesn't sound like one, but her serious face didn't change, no matter how long I kept looking at it.

"……No way. I mean, we're talking about Yuuri-san. There's no way someone would have such a grudge against her."

"Yanagi is charming. Such charm that shakes the feelings of others can sometimes also arouse negative emotions. For example, I'm sure there are girls that are jealous of her because she's so popular with the boys. Also, I'm sure there are guys whose love has changed to a grudge when they were turned down."

"…that is…"

"…Well, this is not more than a possibility. It's not like I felt anything strange

in Shindou's attitude towards Yanagi. In the first place, Shindou is also blessed with talent herself. I don't think she'd be jealous of Yanagi. I just wanted to say that it's dangerous to arbitrarily decide something in advance."

She was right. I had only been thinking like: «[Revolutionary] = 'owner'». If I hadn't thought about the other case, I probably would have tripped.

I wondered what to do. The amount of questions was increasing in spite of the lack of time. I had to believe that we could do it. But the situation was – hopeless.

"……Kazuki."

A comfortable weight was put on my downcast head. Maria ruffled my hair.

"I don't know about Shindou, but I was jealous!"

"Eh…?"

I raised my face reflexively and looked at Maria.

Maria continued to speak expressionlessly while stroking through my hair,

"It took you a long time to stop calling me «Otonashi-san», but for some reason you called Yanagi by her first name «Yuuri-san» in no time. Yanagi was over-familiar as well, and held your hand, and she even whispered into your ear! On top of that, you even arranged a [Secret Meeting]? Boy, this is irritating!"

"……?"

"What do you want to say with this puzzled look of yours?"

"How is that connected to jealousy…?"

Her hand stopped its movement immediately.

"…are you seriously asking this?"

"E-Err…"

"Then let me explain it to you politely. I just said that I found the thought of Yanagi being in your favor to be mortifying."

With those words, Maria laid her hands on mine. Then she brought her face close to mine. I should get used to this by now, but her face was still unbelievably pretty, so my face turned red at once.

"Err… y-your face is, too near…?"

"Do you get why your possible [Secret Meeting] with her irritated me…? The both of you, boy and girl, all alone in a separate room… you know?"

The soft blow of Maria’s whisper brushed against my ear gently. Then, Maria put her index finger into it.

“Hya!”

Maria’s bewitching expression disappeared immediately from her face when she heard the little scream I let out and then burst into a contented laugh. While I was completely baffled, she moved back a little and kept grinning at me.

“You’re being easily toyed with by a younger girl, Kazuki.”

With those words I finally realized that I was being teased.

Uuh… to begin with I haven’t admitted yet that Maria’s younger than me…

“Geez, why do you get this flustered just by a little joke?”

……Joke - from where…?

When I felt entirely down and fell into silence, Maria stopped grinning and said,

“You don’t have to worry, Kazuki.”

And then she smiled more gently than anyone else.

“I will protect you!”

▶Second Day <C> [Secret Meeting] with [Iroha Shindou], [Kazuki Hoshino]‘s room

“W…hy…?”

This leaked unknowingly out of my mouth as soon I returned from Maria’s room.

I looked dumbfounded at the monitor.

«A target for [Murder] has been selected»

That wasn’t the problem. I had already presumed that the person, who can use [Murder], would execute this command. But the selected person was someone other than I had presumed.

«Will you burn [Iroha Shindou] to death by using [Sorcery]?»

Below this message was a picture of Kaichou’s face with the word «KILL?» written over her eyes. If I press this picture, Kaichou will burn to death.

Why isn’t Daiya, but Kaichou the target of [Murder]…?

I desperately tried to sort my thoughts that were about to go wild. Only the [King] or [The Double] could select a target for [Murder]. Neither I nor Maria are one of those two. Also, there was no way Kaichou would [murder] herself. Which meant that either Daiya or Kamiuchi-kun did the selection.

…But Kamiuchi-kun was supposed to be completely convinced that Daiya’s the [Revolutionary]. I don’t think he would select Kaichou then.

So it was Daiya…? No, didn’t Kaichou claim that he was neither the [King] nor [The Double]?

Wait a sec!

So who on earth is the [Revolutionary]…?

“Ya, here I am.”

“HII!”

I almost jumped just by this.

“Mh? Aren’t you exaggerating a bit? You knew that I’d come, after all.”

Kaichou stood in front of the door and raised her hand with an amazed face.

“I-I’m sorry, Kaichou.”

“…I won’t coerce you into it, but could you stop already with that ‘Kaichou’? I don’t really like it, since it gives me the feeling that me as the person beneath it is ignored.”

“…so, Shindou-san…?”

“‘Iroha’ would be nice.”

“……Iroha-san.”

“The ‘san’ isn’t needed, but… oh well… I’ll sit down here!”

While saying she wouldn’t force me, Kaichou–no, Iroha-san forced her opinion upon me and sat down on the table like Daiya had done the previous day.

“Umm… why did you choose me, Iroha-san?”

Kaichou answered with a smile to this question,

“To beg for my life.”

“……eh?”

“Do you not understand? If I don’t kill Daiya Oomine within today’s <C>-block, I’m almost certainly going to be [assassinated]. In other words, my life is in your hands, Kazuki-kun. Kyaa~ please save me~, Kazuki-KUN!”

“…Why do you say this to me…?”

“Aren’t you the [Sorcerer]?”

I desperately suppressed the disturbance that was about to assault me. This was the same trick as Daiya had used on me. Making the same mistake twice would be too pathetic.

“Oh, you don’t fall for it? You’re surprisingly careful, aren’t you? Anyways, if Daiya Oomine doesn’t get [murdered] today, I’m going to die. Ohmygod!!!”

“…umm, are you in a position to use [Murder]?”

“I’m not!”

Iroha-san denied distinctly.

“Then I couldn’t save you on my own even if I were the [Sorcerer]! After all I wouldn’t be able to select the target of [Murder].”

“You can’t? After that conversation in the big room, do you really think Kamiuchi-kun or Otonashi-san would not [murder] Daiya Oomine? That guy dug his own grave there, didn’t he? So shouldn’t it work out if only you did something?”

At least Maria would never select «a target to kill» and, in fact, Iroha-san herself was the selected target.

But since I couldn’t tell her that, I kept quiet.

“I chose you as my partner for the [Secret Meeting] because the probability of letting Oomine-kun go seems the highest for you! I mean, I gather that Oomine-kun and you have been intimate originally and look, you’re kind after all.”

I could only hear sarcasm in those words.

“See, I’m bothered if you let him go. Therefore, I came to give you a push.”

A push to kill Daiya–huh.

“……But didn’t you say previously that killing someone will ruin your life?”

“Yeah, exactly! By urging murder like this, I’m definitely going to ruin my life. To be honest, I have no idea how much I’m going to suffer in the future because of this, since I lack imagination! No, rather I’m trying to not think about it. After all–”

Iroha-san declared with a smile, but also with a strong light in her eyes,

“This is definitely better than dying.”

After seeing these unhesitating eyes of hers, I finally noticed–

–the danger she posed.

What makes her a superman is not just her natural ability. It’s the nature of her psyche. The characteristic that she goes straight for her goal without any detours might resemble Maria. However, compared to Maria, who puts others first and hence may change her own goal, Iroha-san prioritizes her own goal and definitely does not change it. For her goal’s sake, she may step on others from time to time. Naturally, without even noticing it, like a train that crushes a pebble under its wheels.

And this time her goal is «to survive».

Suddenly, I recalled how we first met, which sent chills up my spine.

"……Say"

Iroha-san had said she wanted me to press the button to kill Daiya. But what did she plan on doing if I shook my head at this request?

What would she do in a situation where she believed that she would die if I didn't do it?

"Do you have your knife equipped?"

Iroha-san widened her eyes.

"Oho"

Then she looked at me interestedly and asked,

"How did you notice?"

She thrust her hand into her skirt, took a knife out and threw it to the door.

"Or did you discover it when you tried to peek at my panties? You pervert!"

"……"

"Haha, just joking! …ah well, that I hid a knife can't be settled with a joke, huh. Aah~… can you at least let me make an excuse? It's not like I equipped the knife because of the [Secret Meeting] with you! I'm always holding it when I'm not alone in my room. For real."

"But if I had rejected your request to [murder] Daiya, you would've threatened me with the knife, right?"

"Yeah. But isn't that normal?"

I shook my head at her, who had admitted it easily. There's no way that would be normal.

"Really? Oh well. But as it stands I can't threaten you anymore, so."

"The jute bag…"

"Mh?"

"Hand over the jute bag on the table, because my knife's in there."

Iroha-san widened her eyes once to my words and then smiled wryly. As she was told, she threw the whole bag over to me.

I caught the bag, took the knife out and threw it to the door like Iroha-san.

"…did you also sit down on the table because you thought my knife would be in the jute bag?"

“Ahaha, I didn’t think *that* far. By the way, can I confirm something?”

“What?”

Iroha-san looked straight into my eyes and asked,

“Whether you cooperate in killing Daiya Oomine or not!”

She said this easily and with a fresh smile.

“……um,”

“What?”

“I won’t kill anyone! No matter whether it’s Daiya or anyone else.”

When I replied like this, Iroha-san kept quiet with her gaze and smile directed at me. I averted my eyes and dropped my gaze unknowingly due to this silent admonition.

“You don’t get it. What I’m asking is:”

Iroha-san made a short break once and continued,

“Will you kill Daiya Oomine or will you kill me? - That’s what I’m asking!”

I raised my face and looked at Iroha-san. She was looking at me as if I were a unreasonable child.

“Don’t think you can escape from sin if you don’t press the button! If you press the button, you will kill Oomine-kun indeed. But if you don’t press it, you’ll have killed me for sure!”

“T-That’s–”

“Believe what you want, but that’s what it’s like for me. If I get [assassinated], I will think that you have let me die!”

“Uh…”

In fact, I knew it. I knew that it wasn’t possible to stay clean in this killer-game, no matter what action one might take.

“…I got what you want to say. But I’m not able to [murder] Daiya in today’s <C>. …I can’t tell you the details, though.”

“Does this mean you are no [class] connected with [Murder]? …wait, don’t tell me Oomine-kun wasn’t selected?”

She was almost scowling at me when she asked this. Of course I could not answer her question.

“Judging from your expression, it’s the latter one! Whoa, hey! But ain’t I sure to die then!”

When I kept quiet to this weird excitement of hers, Iroha-san let out a sigh and laid back on the table.

She then covered her eyes listlessly with her arms.

“…hey, Hoshino-kun?”

While maintaining this posture, she whispered so with a completely different voice than before.

“Yuuri was cute, wasn’t she?”

Confused at why she asked this, I gazed at her silently.

“You know, I had never found anything enviable until I met Yuuri. Because I thought I could basically achieve, like, anything. The first person I respected and found enviable…and probably, was jealous of, was Yuuri.”

Jealousy.

I recalled Maria’s words, ‘charm can sometimes also arouse negative emotions’.

“Because it’s like showing my weak spot, I haven’t told anyone until now, but only once during my high school life I was in love. I was on good terms with him from the beginning… and well, since I was inexperienced in love matters and such, I was alright with being friends.”

Iroha-san flashed a bitter smile and said,

“Until he started to go out with Yuuri.”

I was unable to read her feelings from this bitter smile.

“And as a friend of both parties, I had to help both of them out with relationship counseling. Thanks to that I even knew how far they had proceeded! For example when they first held hands or when they first kissed. Hearing that, I naturally thought: –if only their bonds would rip apart.”

“……”

“And as if my prayers were answered, they broke up three months later. Am I not idiotic? I had hoped so, although I didn’t profit when he and Yuuri broke up. After all there was no way he would go out with me and we even became estranged as I stayed Yuuri’s friend… Why did I pray for such an indifferent thing? In other words, I only prayed for their misfortune! Though they were supposed to be important to me. To put it mildly, I’m horrible.”

Iroha-san finally looked at me.

“Did you just think this is a boring, common story?”

I shook my head distinctly.

“Well, that means that even I have some of those clichéd worries. …just how am I a superman?”

Iroha-san shifted her gaze to the naked light bulb at the ceiling and said,

“…I had already forgotten about this childish worry. Really. Because I was satisfied with just knowing that Yuuri’s important to me.”

She flashed a self-ridiculing smile.

“But I remembered when Yuuri died. Even worse, I can’t get it out of my head anymore. I can’t get this inconsequential matter out of my head. Just when my dear Yuuri dies, I can only think of such a thing.”

Iroha-san turned her head slowly to me.

“Tell me Hoshino-kun, what do you think?”

She asked gently with a whisper.

“Did I really – like Yuuri?”

I couldn’t reply anything to this question.

Iroha-san gazed at me expressionlessly for a while. But after she watched me being silent, she suddenly raised the corners of her mouth contentedly.

“Huhu… how was it? My strategy?”

“…Huh?”

“Don’t you want to become my ally after hearing about my human side?”

She said so and chuckled.

But I understood. She might have tried to end that with a joke, but everything she told me were her true feelings. She had no one she could show her weakness. And I was sure she couldn’t even show herself. Therefore, she didn’t even understand her own heart.

This was her weakness. She could only let it out just because she was really about to die.

When Iroha-san saw that I dropped my gaze and closed my mouth, she stopped laughing.

And then she said, in a joking tone–

“I just cursed you.”

With a refreshed expression.

“Now you will always remember this story if I die.”

Her strategy was successful.

Even if she were the origin of all this, I couldn’t wish for her death.

▶Second Day <C> [Secret Meeting] with [Daiya Oomine], [Kazuki Hoshino]‘s room

Daiya sat down on the table and controlled his portable terminal.

“Did you know, Kazu? This terminal cannot be controlled by anyone but its owner.”

Saying so, he searched my jute bag on the table, took out the portable terminal and showed me that he was indeed unable to use it.

“…you seem composed.”

Contrastive to Kaichou who had been under pressure.

“Well, because I know that I won’t be [murdered].”

“Eh…?”

Daiya raised the corners of his mouth.

“Don’t ask something as stupid as why I know this. Of course because I selected the target for [Murder].”

“…so your [class] is…”

“I am the [King].”

He said this so naturally, I was about to believe him right away–but, I wasn’t allowed to. That had to be a trick.

I racked my brain to find a doubt.

“…umm, if you’re the [King], then that means you knew that Iroha-san’s the [Revolutionary], right? So why did you not select Iroha-san immediately when the <C>-block started? Why did you select her only after your [Secret Meeting] with Kamiuchi-kun?”

“During the <B>-part, I suggested subtly that Shindou’s the culprit, but I wasn’t too confident, to tell the truth. Because I doubted Kamiuchi to the same degree as Shindou.”

“Kamiuchi-kun?”

Though he had gotten so emotional due to Yuuri’s death?

“So did you ever think that Kamiuchi-kun might be acting his anger?”

“He’s a dangerous guy in his own way. Even you noticed that he’s at least a slippery fellow, right?”

I nodded slightly.

“And just remember. Shindou’s first partner for the [Secret Meeting] was Kamiuchi. The reason being that he was the one Shindou was the most cautious of.”

Indeed, Iroha-san might have selected him, but…

“…come to think of it, Daiya, it seems to me like you knew Kamiuchi-kun already.”

“Yeah, I knew him already. We went to the same middle school. I didn’t remember his face, though.”

“……eh? But Kamiuchi-kun didn’t seem to recognize you?”

“As if an ant like me would be noticed by our oh-so-great Sir Kamiuchi. Unlike me, who has only good marks, he is a celebrity. I could as well tell you some bad rumors about him, but there’s no necessity to talk about this now, is there?”

I decided I’d take that as ‘there are enough bad rumors to make Daiya and Iroha-san cautious of Kamiuchi-kun’.

“Okay, now I’ll tell you another interesting fact.”

“…what?”

“The [Revolutionary] hadn’t planned to kill Yanagi.”

“…eh?”

My mouth opened with a whack.

“Hah… do I have to explain everything right down to the last detail? The [King] has another special command besides [Murder], hasn’t he?”

“Ah!”

Right, [Substitution].

Using this command, it is possible that [Assassination] hits the wrong target.

“The [Revolutionary] wanted to kill me, not Yanagi!”

Daiya was suspicious and used [Substitution] right on the first day. Hence, Yuuri-san was killed instead because she was [The Double].

If it were really like this, then one couldn’t call Kamiuchi-kun’s anger a performance even if he were the [Revolutionary]. After all this would mean that Kamiuchi-kun had killed his favorite Yuuri-san unknowingly because of Daiya.

“I became convinced that Kamiuchi is not the [Revolutionary] in the [Secret Meeting] just now. Therefore, only Shindou can be the [Revolutionary].”

If Daiya is telling the truth, then this would mean that Iroha-san killed Yuuri-san unintentionally.

If so… the nuance of Iroha-san’s confession just now might change slightly.

To drown her feelings of guilt, she’s desperately trying to find a reason that would justify Yuuri-san’s murder.

–This is how it could be interpreted, maybe.

“B-But… why were you that indirect in the <B>-block then? If you had revealed that you’re the [King], wouldn’t that have cleared up the doubt about you?”

“It’s absolute idiocy to reveal one’s own [class].”

“But didn’t you tell me–”

“That is because I believe that you would never kill me.”

“Eh…?”

When I widened my eyes, Daiya made a frown as if to say that he just made a slip of the tongue. He then averted his eyes almost as if he had blushed.

…he just said that he ‘believes me’, right? This Daiya has?

“…I’ll explain what I wanted to achieve with my statements in the <B>-block.”

Daiya began his explanation, quickly thrusting aside his previous statement.

“Let’s start with my first intention. Making out the suspects. The [Revolutionary] knows naturally that Yanagi died because of [Substitution]. Thus, I purposely raised the question about why Yanagi was targeted, in order to get him to make a mistake. Well, this didn’t work, though.”

I nodded and urged him to continue.

“Then my other intention. Making them think I’m not the [King].”

“…Why would you want to do that?”

“The [Revolutionary] made me his scapegoat. Because he wants me to be the target for [Murder]. But since I’m the [King] myself, this is completely meaningless. Oh well, after all I’m the one that selects the target for [Murder].”

In truth, Iroha-san was selected for [Murder] and not Daiya.

“So what do you think the [Revolutionary] would do about me, when I’m worthless as a scapegoat and even realized his lie?”

Daiya raised the corners of his mouth, seeming almost pleased.

“He would naturally kill me with [Assassination].”

I gulped unknowingly.

“Therefore it’s better he doesn’t speculate that I’m the [King].”

I recalled a line of Iroha-san’s.

«Besides, if you were the [King] or [The Double], you would have surely noticed this, so you can’t be one of those two [classes].»

Aah, I see.

This argument they had was to make Iroha-san believe he’s not the [King].

“—ah”

I noticed that I was about to get sucked up in Daiya’s fast thought process.

But–it might be best to get sucked up and follow him. I mean, I can’t think that Daiya shammed when he said he believed me. …I don’t want to think so.

We’re friends, after all.

Should I really believe Daiya? And should I really assume Iroha-san’s the [Revolutionary] as well as the ‘owner’?

“Kazu.”

While I was silent, Daiya said to me,

“Kill Iroha Shindou.”

“–that’s,”

“If you just use [Sorcery], neither you nor Otonashi will have to tread on thin ice anymore to settle this ‘box’. We’ll get released from everything just by a single resolution of yours. –No, you have to kill her. Or do you want to render even my resolution futile?”

I’m aware that this proposal he interrupted me with is the wisest solution.

But,

“I won’t use [Sorcery].”

My answer won’t change.

“If Iroha-san’s really the ‘owner’, I will persuade her somehow to hand the ‘box’ over to us.”

“Although you and Otonashi might die because of this hesitation of yours?”

“Yeah!”

Daiya sneered at me when I declared so.

“Wow, how naive that you act the goody two shoes as always, even in a killer-game. ‘She looks like a good person, so let’s believe her!’ - or what? That is quite the worst kind of simplemindedness there is. Look at this arm of mine! I got such bad goose bumps I can’t seem to wash this out anymore; how will you compensate for that?”

“……Sorry.”

For some reason I apologized, though I was the one that was being called names. But… that was almost like our usual conversation in the classroom.

“I did, however, know.”

Daiya said while stroking his arm studiedly,

“That you would answer like this.”

Daiya smiled wryly as if he had given up.

“…huhu”

“Whoa, you’re repulsive. Why do you laugh although I’m making a fool of you? What on earth happened to your mind?”

Unintentionally, because, well, acknowledging me while complaining is just like you.

And then I was convinced.

<u>Daiya is telling the truth.</u>

▶Second Day <D> Big room

The [Revolutionary] and the ‘owner’ of the ‘Game of Idleness’ is – Iroha Shindou.

This is the conclusion I’ve arrived at. I have to persuade her somehow so she won’t murder anyone else.

I should be able to do it. She is not a bad person who makes light of others’ lives, after all. Therefore we should be able to settle things, no matter how hard it may appear.

—As if!

Just why was I so unbelievably naive?

“Ah, AaaAh…–”

Heavy breathing.

A pool of red liquid was spreading towards my feet. But I stood stock still, without even thinking of evading it.

“Kamiuchi!”

Maria’s shout brought me back to reality. I went on to recognize what has collapsed before my feet.

“Ah, –”

The pool of red liquid is, blood.

I knew that. Yeah, I was aware of that. But, I didn’t want to realize the meaning of it spreading slowly but surely but slowly but surely but slowly but surely but slowly but surely.

I crouched down slowly and touched the face of this person carefully. A smile was on it, almost as if it was ticklish.

This expression was so «like her» that I called her name unknowingly.

“…….Iroha-san”

step *step* *step*–

What is this sound?

step. This was the sound of a step. Red footprints remained from each step. *step* *step*. The boy who was producing this sound sat down on his seat as if nothing had happened.

Although it was him who stabbed Iroha-san.

“Kamiuchi-kun, why…?”

“Why? You sure ask strange questions, Hoshino-senpai. Because Kaichou would have killed us if we left her alive~! So stopping her is a matter of course, isn’t it?”

“You didn’t have to go this fa–”

I stopped speaking unknowingly.

Kamiuchi’s hand were trembling horribly. He noticed this absurd trembling himself and, ‘Hu, kuku,’ raised a chuckle that didn’t fit to this scenery.

Surely he had found out that Iroha-san was the [Revolutionary] in the [Secret Meeting] with Daiya, hence he might have thought he would die if he didn’t do anything about her.

But that was no excuse to murder her right away… Aah, I see. This meant Iroha-san and Daiya were right in being cautious of Kamiuchi-kun.

“Uh…”

Upon hearing this leaked moan, Maria awoke from her bafflement and rushed to Iroha-san. In order to give her some kind of medical treatment, she examined her body thoroughly and–

–stepped away wordlessly.

“……I… see, scapegoat…”

She said and–coughed up blood.

“Uwa, vomiting blood…… all over me… I look.. uncool…”

She whispered such things with a faint voice.

“__”

I was incapable of saying anything.

I mean, although a girl was vomiting blood before my very eyes, although she was about to die, I involuntarily thought like this:

–it might have been best like this.

“I’m sorry.”

Iroha-san closed her eyes. …Because she had not enough power left to keep them open.

“…..sorry that… I cursed you.”

She mustered her last strength and whispered in a weak voice,

“…sorry that I couldn’t save you…”

“—eh?”

Those were her last words.

–sorry that I couldn’t save you?

While gazing at her motionless body, I considered the meaning of these words.

Iroha-san knew that there was a dangerous character among us that would readily kill Yuuri-san. Knowing this, Iroha-san had to kill this person, whatever it takes.

She took the lead in this [Kingdom Royale], although it meant that she would be doubted all the more by the others. For the purpose of changing the situation for the better, this responsibility-minded girl put herself at risk.

–while being prepared to ruin her own life.

For the sake of protecting her life.

For the sake of protecting our lives.

“……Ah”

I touched her face one more time.

But she didn’t show me a ticklish smile anymore.

She didn’t move anymore. She didn’t breathe anymore. She didn’t live anymore.

<u>And even so, the ‘Game of Idleness’ did still continue</u>.

“—”

I stood up.

I turned my head slowly to him.

Daiya Oomine was touching the piercing in his right ear expressionlessly.

- [Iroha Shindou], chest stabbed by [Koudai Kamiuchi], death

▶Second Day <E> [Kazuki Hoshino]‘s room

«[Koudai Kamiuchi] was strangulated by [Assassination]»
Now he has exclusive control.

- [Koudai Kamiuchi], death by [Assassination]

▶Third Day <B> Big room

“The battle was over at the moment I realized you were the [Sorcerer]!”

Daiya started to disclose his trick in the big room, where only the three remaining players were.

Maria was haggardly sitting on her seat. As she knew everything, she had tried with all her might to teach Kamiuchi-kun about the ‘box’, but he hadn’t lent her his ears anymore.

And then, Koudai Kamiuchi had been killed as expected.

Ultimately, we weren’t able to avert the death of a single person.

Only why did I believe Daiya? Though I knew that Daiya was the ‘owner’, why did I believe such a cheap lie, that there would be another suspect?

Though I knew that [Kingdom Royale] was a game about deceiving…

Therefore, I knew that that outcome was my fault. But, still–

“Didn’t you say you believed me?”

When I complained like that, Daiya raised the corners of his mouth,

“Yeah, I said so. That I believe you will never kill me.”

“…so those were just empty words to deceive me, weren’t they?”

“It was a verbal slip. You could have noticed the true meaning of those words if you were keen.”

I frowned.

“Don’t you get it? I concluded that you, the [Sorcerer], can’t kill me. In other words, I mocked you by saying I could do what I want, you wouldn’t kill me anyway.”

I bit on my lips.

…in short, he made a fool of me. At that time I had thought he averted his glance because he had blushed. But in truth, he had merely noticed his verbal slip and became nervous.

“As I’m the [Revolutionary], it’s only natural that I want to know who the

[Sorcerer] is, since he also has the ability to kill.”

“That’s why you asked me if I’m the [Sorcerer]…”

He hadn’t been worried about me, he simply wanted to know who the person with the most dangerous [class] for him was.

“And you were the [Sorcerer], Kazu. Therefore I won’t be [murdered] if I let you live.”

Daiya flashed a grin and declared,

“Because I believe you, hah!”

So that’s why the battle was over at the moment he found out that I’m the [Sorcerer]…

“But if you had become convinced that I’m the [Revolutionary], you might have still used [Sorcery] anyway. And even if not, you would have done something about me. In short, I just needed to make you think I’m not the [Revolutionary].”

So I danced to his tune and believed Iroha-san’s the [Revolutionary].

–Oh. In fact, everything was simple.

What we should have done was exactly what Maria and I discussed in the beginning. It was just about persuading Daiya and getting the ‘box’ from him.

It was only complicated because Daiya made it look like this.

“…Not everything went without problems, though. Especially Yanagi was a bother.”

“Yuuri-san?”

“Yeah. She tried to make allies. Actually, she probably would have managed making everyone but me her ally. If I had let her live, it wouldn’t have gone this smoothly.”

…I see. To Daiya, who wanted to start the game, Yuuri-san’s existence was a bother, as she was going to stop [Kingdom Royale]. Therefore, Daiya rejected her coming-out proposal and killed her as soon as he could.

“Well then–”

He finished disclosing the trick.

Daiya took a breath and looked at Maria who was sitting on her seat.

“I only have to kill one more player to clear the game.”

Only one of [Revolutionary]‘s enemies has remained.

Only the [Prince] - Maria Otonashi.

Maria didn’t even raise her head when he announced his intent to kill her.

…Ah, I see.

The [Revolutionary] has absolutely no need to kill the [Sorcerer] in order to win. Therefore, I will survive. Maria doesn’t need to do anything, I will survive anyhow. And Maria has no interest in her own life whatsoever.

Therefore, Maria has no interest in [Kingdom Royale] anymore.

She doesn’t mind getting killed like this.

“……”

–don’t mess with me.

As if I could allow such an outcome!

If Maria plans to save me, throwing her own life away, calling herself a ‘box’, making light of herself–

“Daiya…”

I will of course–refuse that!

I scowled at Daiya and declared,

“I won’t let you kill Maria!”

Right. when I noticed Maria’s powerlessness in this ‘box’, didn’t I realize that the time would come when I had to do something? Right now was the time for this!

At that time I hadn’t known what to do. But now,

“If you plan on killing Maria, I will stop you. I will stop you no matter what. Right, even if–”

I’ve easily come to the conclusion.

“–I have to kill you.”

Maria, who had not moved even slightly when Daiya announced to kill her, widened her eyes and looked at me.

Sorry, Maria. I will betray your belief that I would never kill anyone.

“…you seem serious.”

Saying so, Daiya fell into silence.

In the first place, Daiya said so himself. That the possibility existed that even I would use [Sorcery] when it was clear who’s the [Revolutionary].

Daiya made a mistake. Due to Kamiuchi-kun killing Iroha-san, he became incapable of making her his scapegoat and opened up that he was the [Revolutionary].

“Hand over the ‘box’, Daiya. If you do so, you won’t have to die.”

Daiya countered with a composed expression. But having been his friend, I know.

Daiya couldn’t be more nervous.

“Won’t have to die, huh.”

He repeated my words and smiled wryly,

“…Kazu. Do you know what kind of ‘box’ this ‘Game of Idleness’ is?”

Because the sudden change of the subject, I frowned.

“The ‘Game of Idleness’ is just a ‘box’ with the purpose of killing time, that makes the called players play the killer-game [Kingdom Royale].”

“…so?”

“Do you think it ends like this, though its purpose is to kill time? Do you seriously think I would be satisfied with just one round?”

“……”

“This is a meaningless fight to the death. Thus, the feeling of yours that you want to save Otonashi, as well as the resolution to kill me are also meaningless. The outcome is completely indifferent. The next round will have a completely different development of things, just by changing the player. I might even become your ally.”

What on earth is he talking about…?

“However, the sin in this shitty game will remain. If you kill me, the regret alone will remain.”

“……Therefore I should not kill you?”

“Yeah.”

……Hah.

So this was just idle talk to make me spare his life, huh. Even now he still

tried to deceive me.

“It’s painful to see you like this! Please, just give me the ‘box’ already!”

Having been my friend, Daiya should know very well how serious I am about killing him.

And yet–

“That’s out of the question.”

Daiya declared coldly.

“…You know that you’re cornered, right?”

“Doesn’t matter. I have now tasted the «hope» called the ‘box’. As I’ve tasted it, there’s no way I’d let someone steal it from me. If I lose the ‘box’, I will have no goal anymore. A human that merely lives without thinking much, doesn’t differ from a CO_2 machine, does it?”

“The ‘box’ is «hope», you say…?”

This ‘box’ that tormented Mogi-san, Asami-san and Miyazawa-kun is…?

“It’s not such a good thing!”

“Shut up, you’re annoying! I have no interest in your cheap values that could as well be sold at the special sale of some supermarket!”

What was dreadful was that Daiya was serious. He seriously said that the ‘box’ was hope. Though he should know about the previous two incidents.

Thinking that far, something struck me suddenly. Perhaps–

“Has it something to do with Kokone?”

Daiya couldn’t counter immediately.

“…what has?”

“I said, does your ‘wish’ have something to do with Kokone?”

“Why do you suddenly mention her? I almost pity you for this brain of yours that produces such painfully unrelated thoughts.”

But I hadn’t overlooked the strained expression he made until he wrung out these words.

There was no doubt. Daiya’s ‘wish’ had something to do with Kokone.

I then became convinced.

“You don’t plan to… hand over the ‘box’, right?”

I became convinced that Daiya would absolutely not hand over the ‘box’.

“Yeah, that’s what I’ve been saying all the time.”

No matter how much I threaten to kill him, Daiya would not hand over the ‘box’. In other words, we–

“……”

Maria looked at me when I had realized this.

Maria was smiling.

“……Stop it.”

She was smiling. …Smiling as if she had given up on everything.

But I suppose that was the appropriate expression for this situation.

I knew it from the start. I couldn’t crush the ‘box’ against his will by killing Daiya. I couldn’t use [Sorcery] no matter what happened.

That was not because I lacked the resolution to kill Daiya. It had nothing to do with my resolution.

The problem was that I couldn’t use [Sorcery] on my own. Right–

I can’t use [Sorcery] because Maria would never kill anyone.

Therefore,

we lost against Daiya Oomine.

▶Third Day <C> [Secret Meeting] with [Maria Otonashi], [Maria Otonashi]‘s room

I had known it, but my attempt to make her use [Murder] was ignored for a whole 30 minutes.

I recalled Maria’s statement the day before.

«I will protect you!»

I accepted this right away.

Just how foolish am I for accepting her kindness and strength readily like this?

Didn’t I know from the start? Didn’t I know from the start that Maria was powerless in here, as [Kingdom Royale] is about killing and deceiving each other?

This was wrong.

It was me who was supposed to say it.

«I will protect you, Maria!»

But it was too late already.

▶Third Day <E> [Kazuki Hoshino]‘s room

«[Maria Otonashi] was strangulated by [Assassination]»

- [Maria Otonashi], death by [Assassination]

********** GAME OVER **********

Winners

[Daiya Oomine] (Player)
[*Revolutionary*], has killed Yuuri Yanagi, Koudai Kamiuchi and Maria Otonashi with [Assassination], alive.
** Victory conditions have been met due to Yuuri Yanagi, Koudai Kamiuchi and Maria Otonashi’s death.*

[Kazuki Hoshino]
[*Sorcerer*], alive.
** Victory conditions have been met due to him surviving.*

Losers

[Iroha Shindou]
[*Knight*], chest was stabbed by Koudai Kamiuchi on the second day, death due to hemorrhagic shock.

[Yuuri Yanagi]
[*The Double*], death on the first day due to [Assassination] by Daiya Oomine.

[Koudai Kamiuchi]
[*King*], killed Iroha Shindou directly on the second day. Death on the same day due to [Assassination] by Daiya Oomine.

[Maria Otonashi]
[*Prince*], death on the third day due to [Assassination] by Daiya Oomine.

GAME START

新藤色葉

音無麻理亜

星野一輝

大嶺醍哉

神内昂大

柳悠里

▶First Day <A> [Kazuki Hoshino]‘s room

The first thing that entered my sight was the blank concrete ceiling and the naked light bulb hanging from it. I jumped up, surprised by this unfamiliar place.

“…What room is this?”

Why am I suddenly at such a place?

Suppressing my rising confusion, I tried searching through my memory to remember how I’d arrived here.

I’m supposed to have slept in the lower bunk, as always. I can’t remember having moved after that. Neither do I remember having changed the place, nor having met anyone.

I checked the room, I checked the contents of the jute bag, and was told that this was a killer-game by a green bear – Noitan – who suddenly appeared saying «Good - morning».

This was the deed of a ‘box’.

Therefore, Maria was here.

▶First Day <B> Big room

The scenery changed at once.

First, everything became white. It was an unnatural white that made me almost feel like I was in a freshly built, empty hospital without any doctors, nurses or patients.

I looked at the person who was standing closest to me.

“…Daiya”

“It’s been a while, Kazu.”

Daiya, who had been missing, greeted me completely naturally as if we had just met at school after the summer holidays.

He continued speaking without caring that I was completely confused,

“Be grateful, Kazu! I just saved you.”

“Saved me?”

Daiya pointed his thumb at a girl with semi-long hair.

“That girl was about to push you down and threaten you with a knife!”

“Eh…!”

I widened my eyes and looked at her. The green bear might have said that we were going to fight to the death, but it had already begun…?

“Hey, Oomine-kun. If you phrase it like that, it will cause a misunderstanding!”

She objected. It was a voice I had already heard somewhere.

“Misunderstanding? But I did not say a single incorrect thing?”

“Shut up. It’s clear that you bear ill will. I just concluded this was a necessary measure to take.”

I remembered that I had often heard this voice over school’s broadcasting system. So she had to be the student council president.

“Oh, a necessary measure? I don’t really care, but if you go through with that,

you'll just make the others distrust you and put yourself at a disadvantage, you know? If you're scared, then you should just be honest with yourself and tremble!"

Kaichou seemed lightly surprised by Daiya's words.

"…oh well. Pretending to be tough seems to be my bad habit."

She's scared while still looking this composed…? Um, that's a joke, right?

"In case you need an example of how to naturally express fear, have a look, that girl that's clinging to you is a good one!"

Upon hearing that, the black-haired girl next to Kaichou cringed so hard she was almost pitiful. Kaichou gently stroked her head while saying "Don't worry."

…she's really wax-pale. Isn't she a bit too scared, considering nothing has happened yet?

But–that might be rather cute.

I realized that thinking like that in itself was imprudent and that I might lack a sense of danger, but my protective instinct welled up as if I were watching a little animal.

That was a charm Maria lacked…

"Kazuki."

"–ugh!"

R-Right. I should have known that Maria was there; I was careless.

"What was this strange cry supposed to mean?"

"N-Nothing, Maria."

I turned my face away to escape Maria's suspicious gaze.

"Mh, whatever… do you realize the situation we're in? I'm amazed that you can be so much at ease…"

"S-Sorry."

"It's not the time to be infatuated with girls."

"……"

So she had noticed that I was just a bit charmed by the black-haired one after all.

When I kept silent while averting my face, Maria took off one of her loafers and pressed its sole against my face. Um, it hurt and it was rather unpleasant

altogether.

With the shoe sole pressed against my face, Maria whispered into my ear,

“You realize that this is the deed of a ‘box’, right…?”

…aah, right.

This situation was only possible with a ‘box’. Which means that this was the deed of Daiya.

And yet he was acting as if he didn’t know of this ‘box’.

“‘Morning. …Oh, there are a whole three hotties! Lucky me!”

The sixth person arrived, making the number of people and chairs equal.

With that, the players that would «kill each other», as Noitan had said, had gathered.

I had still trouble following the conversation, but as proposed by the brown-haired male student, who had arrived last, we decided to introduce ourselves first.

The brown-haired guy was Koudai Kamiuchi. The girl who had been about to press her knife against my neck was the student council president Iroha Shindou. And finally, the black-haired girl was–

“–I’m Yuuri Yanagi.”

Just by hearing that name, my thought process stopped.

“……Eh? Umm, d-did I say something weird?”

“N-Nevermind! It’s just that I know someone with the same surname.”

She looked at me in astonishment while I was shaking my hands frantically.

“Who is this acquaintance if I may ask?”

“E, err…”

I tried recalling that person–

“—Ah”

Suddenly, Daiya’s words at the school cafeteria came to my mind again.

«Because you want to keep longing for something. Hmpf, even if I admitted that claim, another question remains. Why did you become like that?»

I see. Back then the person veiled by a haze was–

“……A classmate back in middle school.”

«Nana Yanagi»

Having remembered her name, I shook my head desperately. I didn’t want to remember her. She should have stayed forgotten.

«Yanagi-san», who was my first love.

“Oh, a classmate? Can you retain a little affinity for me, then?”

Yuuri-san–using Yanagi-san would be too confusing–tilted her head when asking that.

“Eh? Ah, uh, yeah… I hope we can get along well.”

“Me too.”

Yuuri-san smiled charmingly. Once more I couldn’t help but notice how cute she was.

“What’s with that cheery face, Kazuki?”

Hurriedly I turned around; Maria was staring at me with half-shut eyes.

“I-I’m not particularly making a cheery face-”

“Yes, you are. Your visage is telling me that you’re happy talking to a beauty. What a stupid face…”

“B-But you’re a beauty yourself, aren’t you?”

“……what’s with that flattery? Don’t think I’d fall for that!”

At that point Yuuri-san interjected our exchange,

“U-Umm… I’m not a beauty, really…”

“That’s not true. I think you’re very pretty, you know?”

“I-I…”

Yuuri-san blushed like a peony. When I watched her face silently because I didn’t understand the meaning behind that reaction, I suddenly felt an impact on the back of my head.

“O,Ouch!”

When I turned around there was Kamiuchi-kun watching his fist.

“???”

“No, it might have been unconsciously, but somehow I became hella irritated. Sorry!”

When I held my head, completely confused, Maria let out a sigh.

“Really now, that airheaded philanderer sure makes the tension drop.”

“…how cruel.”

“Well, anyway. That makes it easier to talk. I’ll raise the main subject.”

Saying so, Maria scowled at Daiya.

“What is this all supposed to be, Daiya Oomine?”

With those words, the calm air dispersed.

Everyone’s gaze immediately shifted to Daiya who had been addressed. He did not show any confusion at being accused; no, rather he flashed a daring grin.

“……eh?”

Yuuri-san, who seemed to have trouble following us, unknowingly whispered.

“Oomine-san… has caused this…?”

“What I’m going to say may sound absurd, but will you believe me?”

This time Yuuri-san just blinked in surprise at Maria’s words. Kaichou instead opened her mouth:

“Aah… Otonashi-san, sorry, but we’ll decide on our own whether we believe you or not! You can’t just force us by saying «believe me!».”

“You’re right. But I had to ask for that. It’s a topic that requires me to urge you to believe me in advance.”

Kaichou pursed her lips and nodded, “I see.”

“Let’s see, right, I’ll start with the explanation about what a ‘box’ is. Alright, ‘boxes’ are–”

With that preface, Maria began to explain the ‘boxes’.

That a ‘box’ was a thing that granted ‘wishes’. That they became embroiled in this situation because of that. That the three of us knew about the ‘boxes’. Finally, that the ‘owner’ of this ‘Game of Idleness’ was Daiya Oomine.

They all listened to us earnestly.

“…that sure sounds absurd.”

Kaichou frowned, as she had done all the time while listening to Maria.

“Well, this ‘box’-thing may be absurd, but then again our situation is more than enough absurd as well. To an extent I happen to think that such a thing might really exist.”

“So do you believe us?”

When I asked that Kaichou, apparently out of habit, pursed her lips again and said,

“…no, just ‘might exist’. I mean, if absurd reasons were fine just because of an absurd situation, I could claim whatever I want, right?”

“I see…”

I hung my head, whereupon Kaichou scratched her head and continued,

“…well, but if you really tried to deceive us, you would have used a more realistic lie. Furthermore you answered all our questions without hesitation and you even mentioned doubtful aspects yourself. So I’d say… mhhh, fifty-fifty. …what do you think, Kamiuchi-kun?”

“I have some trouble believing them.”

Kamiuchi-kun denied right away.

“Much more than what they’ve said, it seems suspicious to me how they seem to cooperate. I mean, weren’t they also acquainted from the start?”

“B-But we didn’t have any time to arrange things beforehand…?”

I objected reflexively.

“Maybe. But isn’t it possible that you could somehow match with Maricchi because you knew each other already? Also, at worst it’s possible that the three of you are the wire-pullers, isn’t it?”

“No way!”

“Hoshino-senpai, please don’t get angry. I just want to say that we can’t believe your story that readily as you seem to be operating together right from the start.”

Kaichou apparently agreed, saying “You have a point.”

“How about you, Yuuri?”

“……umm, I’m sorry, but… I can’t get myself to believe that such ‘boxes’ exist. I’m sorry.”

I guessed her hesitation didn’t arise from a lack of confidence in her opinion,

but rather from not being used to express disagreeing thoughts.

“Oh, Yuuri-chan, you matched with me because you want to appeal to me, right?!”

“Eh…? N-No…”

“Uhihi, turning bright red because of a mere joke, cute!”

Kaichou stepped in as if to protect Yuuri-san who had blushed even more.

“Fine, fine, don’t flirt with Yuuri.”

“Kaichou, are you jealous of Yuuri-chan because you’re not being hit on yourself?”

“I don’t even count it as ‘being hit on’ if it’s done by someone like you.”

“Uwa! How cruel! Actually, I have quite a lot of fans!”

Kaichou sighed, signifying that she’d had enough of that, and got back to the subject,

“For now, let’s put the topic of the ‘boxes’ on hold, okay? Yuuri and Kamiuchi-kun, please keep that story in the back of your mind, instead of just dismissing it as absurd. By doing so, we’ll be able to decide whether we believe it or not a bit more objectively at a later date.”

The two of them nodded obediently.

Maria said, “Well, a solid outcome,” but made a discontent, sour face, contrastive to her words.

…well, it’s the same for me. On the one hand I feel discontent that they don’t believe us, but on the other hand I can understand their doubt.

“…Kaichou, what can we do to make you believe us…?”

Kaichou replied immediately when I asked this nervously,

“Show us with your actions that you’re trustworthy. We might still not believe you about those ‘boxes’, but if you do so, we will at least listen to your suggestions about how we can solve this situation.”

But that was much easier said than done.

“Um, in specific, how can we–”

I was interrupted.

«Yaa yaa yaa - it seeMs - you are talking - about something troUbling. - BuT I will tell yOu aboUt - a reality so harsh - iT will - drive that aWay!»

«Okay thEn - I wiSh all oF you a - good fight! - Just dOn’t end - the gAme by - doing somEthing - as bOring- as tuRninG - into muMmies everyone - okAy?»

Noitan disappeared after explaining the rules of [Kingdom Royale].

“Say, Otonashi-san,”

Kaichou’s attitude had changed slightly due to this unsettling story.

“If you’ve been telling the truth, we can also survive [Kingdom Royale] through another way besides clearing it, right?”

“Yeah.”

Kaichou took Maria’s powerful declaration seriously.

–Maybe she will believe us quicker than we thought.

I mean, Kaichou –no, the others as well– don’t want to participate in such a killer-game. If they keep wavering, the time limit will draw near and make someone lose his nerve. Which marks the start of the game. They want to take measures before that happens.

Therefore, if they’re shown another solution, they will want to use it.

“Shall I tell you the specifics?”

And Maria is able to show them that other solution.

“…okay, I’ll give it a try and listen. What should we do?”

“If we can get the ‘box’ out of Oomine, we will be released.”

With that, everyone’s gaze focused on Daiya all at once. Daiya clicked his tongue noticeably at our attitude.

“Say, Oomine-kun, won’t you object against those claims of Otonashi-san?”

As if to repel her, Daiya turned his head away and kept silent.

“…In fact, I can only agree that Oomine-senpai’s suspicious.”

Kamiuchi-san said so with a slightly cold voice; Apparently he had become irritated. Then, he turned around and smiled at Yuuri-san.

“Of course you agree as well, right, Yuuri-chan?”

“Eh?!”

Being addressed out of the blue, Yuuri-san widened her eyes.

“U-Umm… well…”

She murmured vaguely, but judging from her peeks at Daiya, she seemed to

be of the same opinion as Kamiuchi-kun.

The atmosphere in the room had turned entirely against Daiya.

“Hah…”

Daiya sighed deeply at this situation.

“Only idiots here that are easily led by the nose…”

But even that insult did not change the mood.

“How about objecting before you call others idiots?”

Kaichou replied calmly. Daiya seemed utterly amazed and raised a scornful laugh.

“…What? Why are you laughing?”

“I just thought about how easy it would be to annihilate you all as you seem to believe others readily. Are you guys really top students? That’s not true, right?”

“Object already instead of speaking in riddles!”

“Sorry, but I’ll wait to do that until the [Secret Meetings] are over.”

“Hah? What are you saying? So you’re asking us to give you time until you can figure out some good defense, right?”

“I don’t know what stance I should take yet! I have someone I want to consult about that matter.”

“I don’t mind, but you really raise suspicion this way, okay?”

Daiya did not reply.

▶First Day <C> [Kazuki Hoshino]‘s room

«Your [class] is [Revolutionary].»

I stood still for a while, looking at those letters.

“……eh?”

I am the [Revolutionary]? The most dangerous [class] for sure, [Revolutionary]…?

If [Kingdom Royale] starts, without a doubt I’m going to be aimed at first. Because it’s obvious that I’m dangerous, being able to kill on my own.

…No, let’s think the other way around.

That I’m the [Revolutionary] means that I won’t be [assassinated]. Considering things that way, I might be surprisingly safe.

And that’s not all. As I’m the [Revolutionary], who is the likeliest to start [Kingdom Royale], I’m able to prevent the start of the game.

Therefore, the situation instead became safer. Yeah.

I reassured myself like that and took a deep breath in order to calm down my racing heart.

«Ya ya ya - Kazuki-san - it’s tIme - for - [Secret Meeting]!»

“HII!”

This mascot always managed to appear with terrible timing. I couldn’t shake off the feeling that he was doing it on purpose.

After hearing the explanation about the [Secret Meetings] from Noitan, I naturally selected Maria.

[Iroha Shindou]	->	**[Koudai Kamiuchi]**	15:40~16:10

[Yuuri Yanagi]	->	**[Iroha Shindou]**	16:20~16:50
[Daiya Oomine]	->	**[Kazuki Hoshino]**	15:40~16:10
[Kazuki Hoshino]	->	**[Maria Otonashi]**	15:00~15:30
[Koudai Kamiuchi]	->	**[Yuuri Yanagi]**	15:00~15:30
[Maria Otonashi]	->	**[Daiya Oomine]**	16:20~16:50

“…Daiya chose me?”

Which means that I was the one Daiya wanted to consult?

……whatever, my meeting with Maria is earlier.

▶First Day <C> [Secret Meeting] with [Maria Otonashi], [Maria Otonashi]‘s room

“We might have been luckier than we thought,”

Maria suddenly said.

“…how so?”

“Because we were able to tell them about the ‘box’.”

“…eh? Is there a situation where we wouldn’t?”

“There is. If we told them after the explanation of the game, they would have thought that we were just trying to trick them in order to win. We could tell them only because they were still able to consider it properly.”

That was certainly possible.

“Thanks to that, a chance of winning was born. When the time limit draws near, the others will have no choice but to believe us, as only we know a way to get everyone out of here. Oomine will probably offer resistance like now, but look at his personality. No one is going to believe him.”

I think that is true. If I had to decide about who’s right between us and Daiya, then sorry, but I wouldn’t choose Daiya.

“…Maria.”

“What?”

“Is Daiya really the ‘owner’ of this ‘box’?”

Maria raised an eyebrow.

“Only he could be, considering the situation, or do you disagree?”

“But didn’t Daiya prevent the situation from getting rough by stopping Kaichou? That way he gave us the opportunity to talk to them about the ‘box’ seriously. Would he really have done that if he planned to start [Kingdom Royale]?”

“…well, indeed. But I doubt he had thought that far. Or else that might have been a strategy to catch us off guard?”

“Hmmm.”

“Well, although it’s strange, Oomine himself told us that he’s an ‘owner’ after all. Is there better proof than that?”

“…I guess you’re right.”

“As you seem to agree, let’s order our thoughts. Our task is to get the ‘box’ out of Oomine. For that purpose, we have to persuade him. But there’s no way he would readily accept.”

I nodded quietly. Right, now came the main problem.

“We need time for persuading Oomine. And to guarantee that we get it, we have to make sure that [Kingdom Royale] doesn’t start, no matter what.”

“So what should we do?”

“As Shindou said, we should establish a relationship of mutual trust. Therefore it would be best if the players who have the ability to kill revealed themselves, especially the [Revolutionary]…”

“Ah, that would be me.”

“FOR REAL?!”

“Y-Yeah.”

Maria’s appeal made me wince a little.

“That is great. Because that means the [Revolutionary] won’t possibly make the mistake of killing someone due to distrust. Furthermore, if we do a coming-out with appropriate timing, we can gain a lot of trust.”

…so it really was advantageous that I became the [Revolutionary].

“By the way, what’s your [class]?”

“I’m [The Double].”

“…I see.”

We’d be enemies in the game…

“We have a great chance of winning. Then… right, what worries me is that Oomine might team up with someone secretly and make him use [Sorcery] …”

“I have a [Secret Meeting] with Daiya after this, so I’ll ask him various things, then! …Umm, I just have to remind him not to start [Kingdom

Royale] if possible, right?”

“…Yeah. But be careful! You mustn’t let him notice that you’re the [Revolutionary].”

▶First Day <C> [Secret Meeting] with [Daiya Oomine], [Kazuki Hoshino]‘s room

“I have no intention of playing this pathetic [Kingdom Royale].”

That was the first thing Daiya said to me upon entering my room.

“What’s with those wide eyes?”

“N-No, I mean–”

Daiya himself, who is supposed to be the ‘owner’, doesn’t want to start [Kingdom Royale] - isn’t that unreasonable?

“Your face is telling me that you think that can’t be.”

As he guessed correctly, I kept quiet.

“The answer to your doubt is simple. It means that I’m not the ‘owner’ of such a fucking ‘box’. A ‘box’ just for the purpose of making others play a killer-game? Kuku… just how nonsensical is this? There’s no meaning to its existence.”

“…I think so, too, but…”

“So you’re insulting me indirectly by saying that I brought forth this ‘box’, right?”

“No, that’s not…”

So basically, Daiya wanted to say:

He was an ‘owner’ all right. But that ‘box’ that made others play [Kingdom Royale] was not his.

There was another ‘owner’ of this ‘box’.

“But still, what on earth is this ‘box’? It doesn’t seem to allow intervention of any kind. I can’t find any gaps, so the ‘owner’ seems to have mastered it.”

“Eh…?”

Why did Daiya make such a Maria-like remark…?

“Oi oi, why so surprised? Just think about it for once! Otonashi can sense and intervene in ‘boxes’ and knows ‘O’ because she’s an ‘owner’, right? As I’m already an ‘owner’ myself, it wouldn’t be strange if I had the same abilities.”

“Indeed…”

“What’s with that visage? For me, you are much more abnormal as you can remember ‘O’ although he’s supposed to be entirely erased from your memory, you know?”

“…That’s–”

“–not true, my ass. Because we are ‘owners’ and deliberately make use of its singularity, we are capable of such things. But you aren’t an ‘owner’, are you?”

I couldn’t retort.

“…in the first place, what is that ‘singularity’?”

Daiya crossed his arms and answered while thinking.

“…this is only how it feels to me, but at the moment one obtains a ‘box’, one stops being human. That is because one crosses the bounds of mankind thanks to the ‘box’. And with the bounds being removed, the ‘owner’ is also removed from everyone’s everyday life. This is the singular nature of being an ‘owner’.”

After noticing my perplexed frown Daiya added,

“Because one moves up from one’s original standpoint, one becomes able to «see» things one couldn’t before! I don’t mean you can visually see the ‘boxes’ or ‘O’s existence, it’s just, you become able to notice them. Just like you don’t find out about a hairdressing salon in the vicinity until you want to cut your hair, in spite of passing by it every day.”

…Does Daiya really think he could convey his thoughts like that?

“So, why can you «see» ‘O’?”

“How should I know!”

I answered a bit unnerved.

“…Kazu, although you returned it, it seems you have touched a ‘box’ once, right?”

Because it was a bother to reply properly, I just nodded slightly.

“By that you learned that such an absurd thing like a ‘box that grants any

‘wish *really exists. <u>You learned that there are no bounds.</u> How about the thesis that you were a little bit removed at that moment?”*

Daiya focused on me.

“But you would be able to master it. That’s why you became like this just by touching a ‘box’.”

“I wouldn’t be able! I am… normal.”

“Oh no, you’re not. As I said previously, you are floating. Aloof this everyday life.”

“I’m not.”

“You are. Even worse, this abnormality of yours was there even before you touched the ‘box’. Your nature resembled us ‘owners’ from the start! No… rather than resembling us ‘owners’, you might resemble ‘O’.”

“–Cut it out!!”

I roared. I could absolutely not admit resembling such a disgusting being.

Daiya looked at me and sighed after a while.

“Well, this topic doesn’t matter now indeed. Right, I was supposed to convince you that I’m not the ‘owner’ of this ‘box’.”

“…I don’t think I can believe you anymore.”

“Come on, don’t jump to conclusions like that. Mh… would you believe me if I myself stopped [Kingdom Royale] from working?”

“…What do you mean?”

“If [Kingdom Royale] really is about «killing» and «deceiving» each other, then I just have to make sure that won’t possibly happen! The game wouldn’t work anymore, then.”

…We don’t want to start [Kingdom Royale], so our goals would overlap with his… I suppose?

“Do you think the ‘owner’ of this ‘box’ would wish for it to lose its function?”

“I don’t think he would… Err, wait a sec! Does that mean you have a specific idea to stop [Kingdom Royale]?”

“Yeah.”

Then, Daiya stated,

“<u>Finding the [Revolutionary].</u>”

“__”

I held my breath unknowingly.

I could somehow manage to prevent my disturbance from appearing on my face. That was dangerous. A tiny mistake and he would’ve noticed that I was the [Revolutionary].

“Why can you stop it by finding the [Revolutionary]?”

I was able to ask him naturally somehow. Daiya answered without seeming to be suspicious of my attitude,

“Because if I prevent him from executing [Assassination], the game won’t start. So I just need to find the [Revolutionary] and threaten him so he won’t be able to use [Assassination]. The goal would already be achieved then.”

My heart jumped when I heard the word «threaten», but I pretended to be composed and asked,

“‘Won’t be able to,’ you say - but how…?”

“There are several ways, aren’t there? For example by telling him I’d reveal that he’s the [Revolutionary] if he kills someone. He has no chance of winning anymore if his [class] gets revealed. And there is no fool that would kill for nothing.”

“But even if, for argument’s sake, you were able to find the [Revolutionary] and could prevent him from executing [Assassination], what about [Sorcery] …? Isn’t it possible that someone dies because of that, which launches the game?”

“You don’t need to worry about that.”

Daiya declared distinctly.

“Why?”

“Because I am the [Sorcerer].”

…eh? Is he really okay with telling me his [class] so readily?

“F-For real…? Or are you just trying to deceive me?”

“Do you think I would profit in the game by telling you such a lie?”

“Well–”

I thought for a short while, but nothing came to mind.

“I want to slip out of this worthless ‘box’. For that sake, I have no other

choice but to cooperate with you and Otonashi! That's why I don't hide my [class] from you."

"…Are you sure you won't regret it? Our [classes] might be opposing yours after all…"

"You guys know that this matter can be resolved by destroying the 'box', so do the [classes] of this game really matter to you?"

…that may be, indeed.

"I'm fine if you guys realize that I'm not the 'owner' of this 'box'! …Based on that, let me ask–"

He asked me plainly,

"–<u>You are the [Revolutionary], aren't you</u>?"

Because of my reaction right then, Daiya could get confirmation of my [class]. Although it seemed he had been almost sure of that already due to the reaction I had shown to his words earlier.

So now I am under Daiya Oomine's control.

Well… can't be helped, I guess. Nobody would be able to keep his [class] secret from that guy.

▶First Day <D> Big room

Daiya might have been honest when he said that he wanted to stop [Kingdom Royale] from working.

“If you don’t want a deadly feud to start, everyone should reveal their [class].”

He made that proposal after all. If we did the coming-out now, he couldn’t lie. The [class] he would reveal was even the [Sorcerer], who had the ability to kill.

“…Is that the conclusion you came to after consulting Hoshino-kun?”

Kaichou was the one who broke the ongoing silence.

“Right. I don’t plan to obey this game.”

“That’s good to hear, but I don’t think it’s a good idea, you know? Because, for example–”

“Just for your information: if someone doesn’t follow my proposal, I will conclude that he has the will to participate in [Kingdom Royale].”

“Don’t say such arbitrary things!”

“Arbitrary? But I think only I can decide on my own how I judge that?”

Kaichou frowned at his words.

“B-But, Iroha. To tell the truth, I planned to propose the same idea, you know?”

“…well, I got the impression you would during our [Secret Meeting].”

Kaichou looked at us once and asked,

“Are you alright with that? If you have objections, just voice them.”

No one raised their voice. I had expected Kamiuchi-kun to object because it was Daiya’s proposal, but apparently he kept quiet because Yuuri-san had agreed.

“Hah… for real? Well, I guess I can’t be the only one against it as that would disturb the…”

“So we’re going to announce our [classes], right?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

When Kaichou had given up, Daiya handed us sheets of his memo book that had been in his jute bag, one each.

“Write your [class] on it. There’s only one pen, so we’ll do it one after another. Make sure to write it so the others can’t see, so no one can cheat. If you’re done, turn it around. We’ll turn it over all at once when I give the sign.”

Daiya wrote first, then Maria, me, Kaichou, Yuuri-san and Kamiuchi-kun followed his instruction and wrote as well. Six upside down memos were lying on the table.

“Okay, turn them around!”

Everyone turned their memo. I read the [classes] that were written on each.

Maria was «The Double».

Kaichou was the «King».

Yuuri-san was the «Prince».

Kamiuchi-kun was the «Knight».

And Daiya was– I had expected he would use some trick, but he had written «Sorcerer» as he had proclaimed to me.

“…Hoshino-kun is the [Revolutionary], huh. …Hah, I feel relieved now. I was already worried about what to do if it were Kamiuchi-kun.”

“Hey Kaichou, what’s that supposed to mean!”

“Aah, well, actually I mean it just like I said?”

Kamiuchi smiled bitterly, “Uhee…”

“How’s that, Kaichou-sama? This outcome is quite reassuring for you, isn’t it?”

“…Well, yeah. It’s quite reassuring as long there’s no such surprise like Hoshino-kun secretly being awfully wicked.”

“…what’s with that…”

I pursed my lips, but the comment was ignored by Daiya,

“Further, I have one more proposal. I’ll collect the knives that were distributed to each of you. That won’t prevent violence entirely, but it’s much better than not doing it.”

“Don’t tell me you want to have all of the knives for yourself? If so, I’m against it. It’s too dangerous if you’re the only one with power while taking ours, Senpai.”

“Hmpf, we just need to keep them in the room of someone other than me, then.”

Kaichou interrupted him,

“Wouldn’t Yuuri’s or Hoshino-kun’s room be the most appropriate places? Well, I don’t care which one, so decide on it on your own, you two.”

“Huh?” “Huh?”

We raised our voices simultaneously and exchanged glances when our names were suddenly called.

“Ah, please go ahead, Hoshino-san.” “Ah, no, please, you go ahead, Yuuri-san.” “I don’t particularly want to…” “I don’t, either.” “I think that you would store the knives properly for us…” “I would be at ease if you did, Yuuri-san.” “But…” “You just need to keep them, really.” “But that’s the same for–”

“Fine, fine, Yuuri it is.”

Kaichou interrupted us while clapping her hands and decided on her own.

“I-Irohaa~”

“Be quiet, it’s decided! Everyone, bring your knives for tomorrow’s <B>-time. Yuuri will collect them. Okay? So, are you finally happy now?”

“Not yet.”

Kaichou let out a sigh at his behavior.

“Fine, fine, so what’s next, oh great Emperor?”

Daiya completely ignored Kaichou’s sarcasm and continued,

“With that, [Kingdom Royale] stopped working for the time being. However, our goal isn’t just to stop it, but to slip out from it. In the end it’s just a temporary agreement. If the circumstances change, it won’t hold anymore.”

“Well, I guess so. So what do you suggest? Do you have some important information?”

“I know how to slip out of this game.”

Not only Kaichou, but everyone of us tensed up.

…Daiya, don’t tell me–

“We just need to destroy the ‘box’.”

Exactly as I had feared. Daiya admitted the existence of the ‘boxes’ in front of the others.

In a condition where he was the main suspect.

“The ‘boxes’ that Maria Otonashi mentioned certainly exist. If you fail to believe, just think of the ‘box’ as a metaphor of the thing that drove us into this situation. Anyways, in order to achieve our goal, we just need to destroy this ‘box’. We are able to do so by killing its ‘owner’.”

“But didn’t Otonashi-san say something along the lines of you being that ‘owner’?”

“……I take that claim back for now.”

Maria interrupted their talk with a frown.

“Oomine is the greatest suspect - that doesn’t change. But I’ve come to the conclusion that it’s still too early to rule out other possibilities. Firstly, that’s how I felt during the [Secret Meeting], and secondly, Oomine’s proposals do, without doubt, prevent anyone’s death. …Therefore, I can’t say for sure whether he’s the ‘owner’.”

Kaichou held her head without hiding the bewilderment from Maria’s positive reply.

Neither Maria nor I knew whether Daiya was telling the truth or not. We didn’t know what Daiya planned to do about us.

But it was certain that [Kingdom Royale] was the deed of a ‘box’.

If only they believed that, I was sure [Kingdom Royale] would not start. Then, we could unite and head towards a solu–

“Please spare me!”

My optimistic thinking was halted abruptly.

Everyone’s gaze focused on Kamiuchi who had spoken.

“Why are you considering it seriously, Kaichou? There’s no need for that, really!”

“…why?”

Her question caused Kamiuchi-kun to flash a grin and declare,

“I mean – those three are already completely conspiring together, aren’t they?”

And then I – grew stiff.

The usual looseness had disappeared from his face. Instead, there was a lack of expression, radiating cruelty.

“This is… a trap. Yeah, a trap. Of course we have no clue what kind of humans ‘owners’ are, right? That means that, if we searched for that ‘owner’ we’d have no other choice but to entirely listen to what those three say, and search based on that. Do you realize what that means?”

Kamiuchi-kun flashed a faint smile and said,

“They are able to – make someone appear to be the ‘owner’ we are supposed to kill.”

What–

What is he saying…?

“We have no plans to kill the ‘owner’–”

“–Shut up!”

A single outcry.

Just that had an extreme impact.

I realized that instant; That person was – different. He was living in another world than I did. And in his world – violence existed.

No one was able to speak.

What broke the ongoing silence was the sound of Kamiuchi-kun’s deep and long sigh. After breathing in and out several times, his expression had returned to the usual leisurely one.

But I wasn’t calmed by that expression anymore, not like I was before.

“You can’t believe that such ‘boxes’ exist either, right, Yuuri-chan?”

I heard the sound of Yuuri-san draw breath.

He was coercing her into agreeing. A denial wouldn’t be accepted.

“……I…”

Gaining a false legitimacy for the sake of getting rid of us by making her nod.

That was his objective.

Therefore, it would be over once Yuuri-san nodded.

But for her it was impossible. It was impossible a timid girl like her could

hold against him in his current state.

Yuuri-san stole a short peek at me with her teary eyes, but then she averted them right away.

With trembling lips she murmured,

"……yes, I can't believe it."

Aah, that's it…

Is what I thought, but–

"……But,"

She continued,

"I think we can at least trust Hoshino-san. Therefore, I can't… accept that he would want to lure us into a trap."

She couldn't accept it.

She clearly said so. She did so while trembling, while fearing him, but still she managed to persist against Kamiuchi-kun's opinion. She defended me.

She crouched down, her hands in front of her chest, her breathing fitful - apparently it was a reaction to mustering up all her courage.

Kamiuchi-kun seemed to be surprised by her rebuttal and gazed at her with wide eyes. Then he shot me a sharp glance. I gulped as I felt like a criminal about to be judged.

"Well, I have to admit that Hoshino-senpai looks good-natured to me as well."

And then, the enmity finally disappeared from his expression.

…did we make it…?

Yuuri-san raised her face and looked at me. She relaxed her tense face and sent me a smile.

Like that we managed to preserve the hope for a peaceful solution, thanks to Yuuri-san's courage.

Daiya, Kaichou, Kamiuchi-kun and Maria returned to their rooms. When I was about to go through the door as well, Yuuri-san grasped my hand.

"What's the matter?"

I noticed right when I asked that–Her hands were trembling.

"…I was frightened."

She whispered without raising her face.

“He was… very frightening.”

“Yeah… Umm… You pretty much saved us, Yuuri-san. Thank you.”

I tried to comfort her with a smile, but the fear didn’t leave her expression.

“The [Secret Meeting].”

“…eh?”

“I’m frightened… of the next [Secret Meeting] with him.”

Yuuri-san was wax-pale like the time we first met.

“Y-You don’t have to worry! I mean, it seems Kamiuchi-kun likes you, so–”

“–that’s why I’m frightened!!”

She raised her face and almost shouted before looking at the ground again almost immediately. Apparently she felt uncomfortable for her loud voice.

“S-Sorry, I didn’t want to unsettle you.”

“M-Mhm…”

What’s the meaning of that?

[Secret Meeting] - it’s about getting to be all alone with someone in that prison-like room. Since Kamiuchi-kun seems to like her, I don’t think he would kill–

“Ah…”

Then I realized.

I realized what Yuuri-san was frightened of.

Seeming to have noticed that I guessed that, she grasped my hand tightly.

“……I’m serious, you know?”

“Eh?”

“I’m seriously thinking that we can trust you, I didn’t just say it to calm Kamiuchi-san down.”

Her trembling became even worse. Worrying about her, I looked at her downcast face.

“I’m scared… I’m scared…!”

She was crying.

Damn, what should I do?

As I judged that thinking about it wouldn’t help, I returned the pressure of her trembling hand. Yuuri-san put her left hand on mine as well and grasped me strongly.

“Ah–”

Again

Yet again.

Again, I remembered.

I remembered «Nana Yanagi» more clearly than I had when I heard Yuuri-san’s last name.

Rather, it seemed weird to me; how I could forget her so completely? Though it hadn’t even been two years since, I hadn’t been reminiscing about her very existence recently. I had forgotten her almost as if those events hadn’t even happened.

Don’t tell me the wish I bore ever since I betrayed her, «I want to forget Nana Yanagi», had been granted?

Right – by painting her over with my everyday life.

«Even worse, this abnormality of yours was there even before you touched the ‘box’.»

–That has nothing to do with it. Definitely not.

“…I’m sorry, Hoshino-san, I’m really sorry… I’m going to be selfish now, but please forgive me. I’m trusting you arbitrarily. Therefore–”

She spoke. Yanagi-san spoke,

“Therefore, please– don’t betray me.”

Her teary face… reminded me of my first love for some reason.

And then, at the moment I thought they resembled, I said it.

“I won’t betray you. I won’t betray you anymore, «Yanagi-san»!”

▶First Day <E> [Kazuki Hoshino]‘s room

When I had returned to my room I finally reminisced about her after a long time.

Nana Yanagi. She was my classmate, my first love and – the girlfriend of my best friend.

While having the same last name, she was completely different from Yuuri-san. If I had to describe her in one word, she was a troublemaker. For example once she suddenly shaved off her eyebrows during break, or she made the classroom turn pink with a fire extinguisher - she had played countless numbers of these antics. The girls were secretly calling her «weirdo».

Naturally Yanagi-san was scary to me and honestly, I really didn’t want to associate with her. I think there are almost no people that would want to associate with a classmate who has dyed her hair blonde, wears an anachronistically long skirt that would even put off other delinquents, and smokes secretly.

But there was one of those ‘almost no people’ close to me.

«Touji Kijima», my best friend.

Touji was a very curious person whose eyes always sparkled when he came upon something unknown. He always watched her eccentric endeavors with radiant eyes. Perhaps it was natural for Touji to be attracted to her.

Yanagi-san had been rejecting him when he had first started to approach her. But in truth, she had probably longed for someone that would care about her. Finally she accepted Touji and they became lovers.

And right when they became lovers, she showed her true nature.

That was – the nature of being a lonely person.

She depended on Touji. But the level of that dependence was plainly abnormal. She would never leave his side and she would always menace other

girls that approached him in order to ward them off. Because of Touji's wish, she dyed her hair back to its natural black color, she started wearing a normal skirt and she buried her cigarettes in the garden.

Touji was Yanagi-san's everything.

Therefore, she was already unable to endure it just when he, her everything, did not completely fulfill her expectations, even if it was just words or manner she didn't like. She got awfully hurt by the tiniest let-downs. Sometimes so badly, she would cut her own wrist.

The only one who could listen to her lamentations was me.

Her phone calls always started with her crying voice. She would often lead me to secluded places and cried.

At first, I only listened to what she had to say. But she gradually sought greater comfort from me. She made me stroke her head, she made me hug her, she made me sleep next to her and she made me drink her tears. I remember her saying something unreasonable like she would calm down when looking at my face while I was licking over her cheeks, though she had feelings of guilt towards Touji at those times.

Right, she also depended on me.

To be honest, it was tiresome. There were times when I didn't answer her phone calls as well because she was a bother.

Considering even I was like that, Touji found her tiresome in no time as well.

After several talks about separation, they finally split up for good.

From that day on she buzzed around me each and every day. While there surely are a lot of people that don't taste others' tears in their entire life, I tasted that saltiness to an extent that I got completely sick of it. But I endured it because I knew that I was the only one she could rely on.

But even I was at my limit. My stomach hurt because of my constant irritation. I lost my hunger. It made me sick - why did I have to keep comforting a girl that wasn't even my girlfriend?

Therefore, one day I told her,

"I can't stand your company anymore."

She didn't understand me.

I gradually used rougher words in order to make her understand my intent.

I can't stand your company anymore, you're a bother! You only think about yourself! Cut it out already! You were abandoned by Touji because you don't

care about others! I don't want anymore, don't follow me around anymore, you weirdo–

And the day I insulted her like this–-Yanagi-san and Touji disappeared.

The other classmates that only knew them as lovers arbitrarily called it elopement, but I knew that wasn't the case.

So why did those two disappear simultaneously?

That's obvious. Yanagi-san, who had despaired because of my betrayal, carried Touji off. And – made sure he could never return.

I blamed myself. It was my fault. Because I failed to support her. Because I rejected her despite being the only one she could depend on.

But what occupied my heart even more than the feelings of guilt were feelings of emptiness.

Everything in my daily routine became virtually insipid. A daily routine as flavorless as a gum that has been chewed for three days. It was lacking. The world was lacking flavor.

It was lacking that strong saltiness.

That's cruel! I wouldn't have thought you would disappear from me just because of those words! I thought you would still continue to depend on me! Making me, making me taste such a flavor and then disappearing like that is just too irresponsible!

Why–was it Touji?

If it had been me, I would have given you everything. Though I had given you almost everything already.

After noticing the hollowness in my heart, I finally…really, finally realized.

–Aah… that was it.

I – had loved Nana Yanagi.

But she wasn't here anymore. She took Touji with her, she took almost everything in my heart with her, and disappeared somewhere.

But even after betraying, hurting, cornering and killing my loved one, my everyday life continued. Because I was living, I had to keep on living. I had to keep on living in a world without her.

For that sake, I decided to forget her.

I decided to forget Nana Yanagi. She was not someone I should have

accompanied to begin with. I wanted to seal her, who was almost something like the symbol of the abnormal due to her eccentricity.

And then, I really forgot her, surprisingly well.

Come to think of it, when did I start being particular about my everyday life?

«Please select a target for [Assassination]»

This message plus the photographs of six people, including myself, were shown on the monitor.

There was no way I would do such a thing.

I didn't understand this 'Game of Idleness'. Even the thought of it having no meaning at all went through my head.

I let myself fall on the bed.

But even if this 'box' has no meaning - so what? Does the everyday life I'm going to return to have a meaning?

This everyday life that only has the purpose of forgetting her?

"__"

Yuuri-san came to my mind.

I was aware that I was overlapping «Yuuri Yanagi» with «Nana Yanagi» without someone having to point it out to me.

If I manage to save Yuuri-san without betraying her, will I then be able to get free from «Nana»'s curse?

I don't know. I don't know, but–

The instant I imagined Yuuri-san's face,

–I felt the taste of someone's tears in my dry mouth.

▶Sixth Day <B> Big room

It became the sixth day without any notable progress.

As expected by Daiya, [Kingdom Royale] stopped working when we revealed our [classes] and collected all knives. But those three were still not completely believing us about the ‘boxes’, no matter how much we explained it to them, and we were still unable to make out the ‘owner’. And the time limit was gradually drawing nearer.

I went from my room to the big room. I had already gotten used to that warp-like sensation, so it was no big deal anymore.

The white room that’s unnaturally white.

–But nothing to worry about, I guess. As I’m the [Revolutionary] and Daiya’s the [Sorcerer], [Kingdom Royale] won’t start.

“Kazuki-san.”

Yuuri-san discovered me and approached me quickly with a bright smile.

“Mh? Did something good happen?”

Apparently unaware of her smile, Yuuri-san tilted her head and let out a small voice, “Eh?” Iroha-san, who was watching her with a sidelong glance, started teasing her:

“Yuuri’s happy to meet you, Kazuki-kun! She sure has become attached to you, hasn’t she?”

One couldn’t judge from her tone whether she was serious or not. Yuuri-san’s face turned bright red.

“I-Iroha~! Please don’t speak as if I were a puppy or something~”

I imagined Yuuri-san wagging a dog’s tail, rushing towards me.

“Phf!!”

Oh dear, that would suit her too well!

“W-Why did you just laugh, Kazuki-san?!”

She puffed up her cheeks. For the moment I decided to seek refuge in smiling

at her.

But still – over the days we sure had gotten used to chat with each other.

From the second day on we had endeavored to talk to the others actively for the sake of deepening our trust. We also had done [Secret Meetings] with each player. I thought this was pretty successful, as even Daiya had participated.

At least I couldn't imagine anymore that any one of us would kill someone.

"…Kazuki-san, as punishment for laughing, please… um, for today's [Secret Meeting], select me as your partner."

For some reason Yuuri-san's still puffed-up cheeks were slightly red when she said that.

"I don't mind, but how is that punishment?"

"…eh? …ahhh, a-anyway, it's punishment! …probably!"

She said so with all her might, swinging her arms up and down. That amused me somehow.

"Mh?"

Maria, who had stolen a glance at her, approached us while scratching her head moodily.

"…eh? What's wrong, Maria?"

At first, Maria kept silent for some reason.

"……well, what I want to say is… you have already spent four [Secret Meetings] with Yanagi, right?"

"Eh?"

"It will be the fifth one if you go today. So it's possible that the others think you prefer a specific person. If you have a [Secret Meeting] with a specific person five times even, the cooperativeness that has finally started to arise between the six of us might be at stake."

"…umm? In short, you don't want me to have a [Secret Meeting] with Yuuri-san?"

"No, I'm not particularly talking about Yanagi. I'm just saying that a situation in which others might think you prefer a specific person is dangerous."

"…aren't you chasing ghosts?"

"You've only had three [Secret Meetings] with me!"

Wasn't her point something else…?

“Otonashi-san is jealous. How cute!”

Iroha-san said while looking at her amusedly.

“…what are those weird false assumptions. I just pointed Kazuki’s attitude out.”

“Otonashi-san’s desperate.”

“…it seems my words don’t reach you.”

“Maria, are you jealous?”

–Bam!

“O-Ouch!”

She just kicked my shin with all her heart!

“Hah…”

Kamiuchi-kun, who had been watching us while playing around on his portable terminal, interrupted us with an amazed expression.

“Aah, geez, actually, I’m incredibly jealous, so could you please die, Hoshino-senpai?”

“Eh? What are you jealous of…? Wasn’t I just kicked?”

“…what’s with that face as if you don’t know what I’m talking about? Is that the winner’s composure?”

When I tilted my head to those words Kamiuchi-kun sighed once and returned his attention to his portable terminal.

He might still be acting like that, but I thought I had managed to get on quite well with him. I had become anxious when I saw that violent side of him, but after talking to him I noticed that he was quite a sociable fellow.

“Mh? Ah, I see.”

He put the portable terminal on the table and stood up.

“What’s the matter?”

“Ah, I just reread the past conversations and came to a conclusion!”

He walked over to Daiya, who was sitting on a chair, and tapped his shoulder with a smile. Daiya frowned annoyedly at this overly familiar behavior. That was how they usually handled each other recently.

“Oomine-senpai. I’ll believe you about that ‘box’-thingy!”

I was surprised and reflexively asked,

“Eh? For real, Kamiuchi-kun?”

“Why should I lie? …oh well, to be frank, it’s not a matter of believing or not anymore. We have to come to a conclusion now that the time limit draws near. And since we don’t have any other explanation but the ‘box’, we have no other choice.”

Come to think of it, Maria had mentioned that they would have to believe us when the time limit draws near.

“OK, what were we supposed to do again? If memory serves me right, you said that this would be settled by destroying the ‘box’, right? So how about this:”

Kamiuchi-kun rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt.

“Let’s kill Oomine-senpai.”

“—Eh?”

But there was no time.

I had no time to realize the meaning of those words.

Without giving us time to realize, he swung down his and–-

He killed Daiya.

“—ah…”

……Eh? What the…?

Although I was able to describe what had happened, my realization still couldn’t follow.

Kamiuchi-kun had slashed Daiya’s throat. Blood had spurted out from the wounded spot. Daiya had stopped moving with opened eyes. Then he – had died. I could confirm that. But I was only able to recognize that as a fact, not to realize its meaning.

Therefore, I just stood still, dumbfounded.

Kamiuchi-kun’s shirt had turned deep red and his face was full of Daiya’s blood. In his hand he was holding the knife that was not supposed to be here. The combat knife that we had collected.

“Strange, isn’t it?”

While toying with the knife he had hidden at his belt, Kamiuchi-san whispered that.

“Didn’t you say this would be settled if the ‘owner’ dies? And the ‘owner’ was Oomine-senpai, right?”

He looked at Maria.

“Hey, wasn’t it like that, Maricchi?”

Maria had kept her eyes opened and was completely taken aback.

Apparently he hadn’t expected an answer to begin with and continued to talk,

“Does that mean Oomine-senpai’s still not dead? Okay, then I’ll do that.”

He said and–

–thrust his knife into Daiya’s neck a second time.

Even more blood splashed around.

Daiya’s body fell over due to the impact and his head crashed on the table with a loud thud. Red liquid started to spread out on the table.

“Eh,–”

Yuuri-san raised her voice and fell on her back.

“IIAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!”

Kamiuchi-kun looked at Yuuri-san and smiled.

“Your scream sure is cute… mh, but he’s definitely dead, isn’t he? Which either means that Maricchi’s first judgement was wrong or the ‘box’ was a lie, mh. Ah, but I decided to believe the story about the ‘box’, right? So I should consider Oomine-senpai was the «wrong one».”

«Wrong one», he said.

I understood the meaning of that instantly. –unfortunately I understood.

“Maricchi.”

The murderer asked.

“With whom should I continue?”

He asked who the «right one» was.

Suddenly, I noticed that the hand he was holding the knife with was trembling.

At first I thought that was out of fear of his own actions. But after seeing his expression, I understood the real reason.

That hand was trembling in excitement.

Aah – why did I misunderstand him? Why did I think I had become on good terms with that murderer?

He's just been waiting for the right time to expose the violent nature that he has been hiding.

[Kingdom Royale] is a game about deceiving. About killing.

There's never been a chance to stop it from working. Daiya's attempt failed and he got killed in compensation.

Even on the very first day …[Kingdom Royale] had already begun.

"Why, do you still… have that knife?"

I asked him while looking at the knife that was dripping with Daiya's blood.

"That's the first question that comes up? Well, it was child's play. I just stole it during a [Secret Meeting] with Yuuri-chan. That's all."

"…Eh? So, it's my fault…?"

She raised her head and looked at him with wide eyes. The murderer smiled back at her and said,

"Please be more careful!"

"Ah–"

Yuuri-san was at a loss of words and burst out in tears.

"So, who's next, Maricchi? …hey, still frozen? Aren't you overreacting? Well, but to tell the truth, I think naive characters are pretty cute."

While blurting out those indifferent things, he scrutinized his bloody knife.

"…I decided."

He said so and approached me.

"I think I'll go for Hoshino-senpai, since I'm jealous of him. –After all I want him to die anyway."

He designated me as if he was just ordering his lunch.

But the intent to kill dwelt in his eyes.

I looked at the blood-stained knife and grew stiff. After all, it was the knife that had actually taken Daiya's life.

The murderer approached me.

Although I had to escape, I was unable to move.

“Wait.”

Kamiuchi-kun stopped obediently at Maria’s words.

“What, Maricchi?”

Maria told him, who was hiding the intent to kill in his eyes,

“I am the ‘owner’.”

Kamiuchi-kun raised an eyebrow.

“You have to kill me, not Kazuki.”

He laughed bitterly when he realized what she was saying.

“Haha, so you want to save him so badly you would sacrifice yourself? Amazing!”

“I’m just telling the truth.”

Kamiuchi-kun drew close to Maria, who was scowling at him. Maria raised her arms to emphasize that she had no intent to resist.

“Ma-Maria…”

When I called her name, she sent me a smile. I saw that gentle smile and became convinced:

She said so without a strategy. She was really just about to sacrifice herself for me.

“I’m moved, Maricchi. I never thought there would really exist someone that values others’ lives more than his own. It doesn’t look like you just blurted out empty words, either. That’s love! Truly love!”

Maria laughed scornfully.

“I see. Great that you were moved.”

“Are you really fine if you die in order to save Hoshino-senpai?”

“Yeah.”

Kamiuchi-kun snorted when Maria declared so without hesitation.

“That’s problematic. Isn’t that love much too beautiful? Aah, geez, I got it! It’s not like I want to become the bad guy, I just want to settle this matter as fast as possible. I really don’t feel like playing your third-class villain who would attack you while screaming «I’ll have you die then!» So, the two of you can live.”

While stroking her head over-familiarly Koudai Kamiuchi continued,

“If you let me do you, Maricchi.”

He pressed the knife against her throat.

“__”

Maria’s face contorted in revulsion. She scowled at him and, ignoring the fact that he was pressing a knife against her, brushed away the hand he was stroking her with.

“……don’t mess with me. I’d rather die than surrender my body to you.”

“How cruel! There are a lot that would do it willingly for me, though. So you won’t accept?”

“Of course not!!”

“Never mind then.”

He gave up readily – too easily.

“Then I’ll just do Yuuri-chan instead.”

There’d be no way he’d let go.

Yuuri-san instantly turned pale when she apprehended that his words weren’t a lie, forced to realize by his cold smile at her and the lust in his eyes.

“N-No–!!”

“No, but Yuuri-chan, it can’t be helped, can it? Maricchi rejected me after all… Ah, but I prefer you anyway, so I don’t mind at all!”

“Something like that, i-is impossible to me…”

“Then I’ll kill Maricchi and Hoshino-senpai.”

Yuuri-san’s face turned even paler at those inhumane words.

“Please give yourself up already if you don’t want those two to die because you rejected me!”

Yuuri-san turned around slowly and gazed at me. Those eyes were full of tears.

She conveyed me a message with those tears.

«–don’t betray me.»

–Ah, right. Yuuri-san had been fearing such a situation from the first day on. And I had promised her. I had promised to not betray «Yanagi-san» anymore.

But if I tried to save Yuuri-san, Maria would–

“…Stop.”

It was not me who said so in a low voice, but Maria.

Koudai Kamiuchi opened his mouth contentedly.

“Mh? Well, if you feel like pleasing me now, go ahead.”

She had surely anticipated that he would say that.

Maria bit tightly on her lips, so strong that blood started to flow from her mouth. Then she averted her gaze from me and–said clearly,

“……Okay, then content yourself with just me.”

–what,

–what are you saying, Maria?

“Eh? For real?”

Koudai Kamiuchi widened his eyes.

“……fu, fufu, ahahahaha!”

This determination–

Although she would rather die, she was about to give in in order to save Yuuri-san – Maria was that determined – and Koudai Kamiuchi pointed at her and laughed.

“Ahahahaha! For real? If it were for saving your beloved Hoshino-senpai, I would still get it! But you would do such a thing for Yuuri-chan although you only spent a few days together? Ahaha, that’s too ridiculous!!”

“……what’s so funny?”

“It’s a culture shock for me! Your values are weird! It’s distorted to prioritize others before yourself! Wait, do you actually think that’s beautiful?!”

Indeed, I also couldn’t appreciate Maria’s attitude. From time to time her self-sacrifice even hurt my feelings. Her attitude couldn’t always be called as living for the sake of others.

But.

Even if her attitude was wrong–

That didn’t mean that such a guy was allowed to make fun of it.

“So others’ suffering is worse than your own pain? Ah, then I’ll take back my word. You don’t become her substitute. I’ll rape Yuuri-chan whatever you do.”

“…what… are you saying, bastard?! There’s no meaning in that, is there!?!”

“Isn’t it funnier that way?”

Even Maria lost her tongue. Koudai Kamiuchi sneered at her when he saw her shock.

He thought of it as funny. He considered her awe-inspiring nature pathetic and amused himself by toying with her.

I can’t allow that. I absolutely can’t allow him to insult Maria’s high pride. … Though I can’t allow it– Even though I can’t allow it, why–

“Uh, uh, uuuuuh…”

Yuuri-san’s crying voice resounded. Maria had the knife pressed against her throat.

–why can’t I do anything!

“You don’t want to die yet, right, Senpais?”

No one could oppose him, so he declared,

“Okay, then from now on you’re all my slaves.”

- [Daiya Oomine], carotid artery cut by [Koudai Kamiuchi], dead

▶Sixth Day <C> [Kazuki Hoshino]‘s room

«SelecT - a partneR - for thE - [Secret Meeting]»

Despite Noitan’s prompt I could not move, feeling totally helpless.

I couldn’t do anything. Though Yuuri-san and Maria were both suffering, I couldn’t do anything to save them.

Yuuri-san was forced to select «Koudai Kamiuchi» as her partner for the [Secret Meeting].

Although she knew what was awaiting her, she had no other choice but to select «Koudai Kamiuchi». Just how cruel was that…?

“—gh!”

I bit on my lips.

I should… I should have been able to do better. Even if it isn’t possible any more, if I had taken the danger Koudai Kamiuchi posed more seriously, I could have averted this.

Right, if I had taken measures at the time Yuuri-san cried to me about him being scary, this wouldn’t have happened. This outcome is the result we got because we underestimated [Kingdom Royale] and wasted our time.

…But it isn’t like everything is over yet.

I was about to press «Yuuri Yanagi» ‘s button–

«You only had three [Secret Meetings] with me!»

For some reason I recalled that statement Maria made.

…why did I just remember that? That doesn’t matter now, does it? The best thing I can do right now is naturally to comfort Yuuri-san, who was hurt.

Sure, Maria’s in danger as well. Like Yuuri-san, she was forced to select Koudai Kamiuchi.

But not for the same reason as Yuuri-san. He just doesn’t want to give her the opportunity to consult us. As his most important goal is survival, he tries to

crush any possibility of us conspiring and working out a plan against him.

Probably he doesn't even care about the 'owner' anymore. Rather than to find and kill an 'owner', whose very existence is dubious, he thinks about winning [Kingdom Royale].

Koudai Kamiuchi is the [Knight]. In order to win he has to kill the [King] and the [Prince].

And those targets are Iroha-san, who's the [King], and Yuuri-san, who's the [Prince].

So Maria's still safer than those two. Of course she's still in danger, but the dimension of danger is different.

Therefore–

Therefore, I – selected «Yuuri Yanagi»

[Iroha Shindou]	->	**[Yuuri Yanagi]**	17:00~17:30
[Yuuri Yanagi]	->	**[Koudai Kamiuchi]**	15:00~16:00
~~**[Daiya Oomine]**~~	dead		
[Kazuki Hoshino]	->	**[Yuuri Yanagi]**	16:20~16:50
[Koudai Kamiuchi]	->	**[Yuuri Yanagi]**	15:00~16:00
[Maria Otonashi]	->	**[Koudai Kamiuchi]**	16:20~16:50

▶Sixth Day <C> [Secret Meeting] with [Yuuri Yanagi], [Yuuri Yanagi]‘s room

The instant I arrived at Yuuri-san’s room, I was embraced.

She immediately buried her face in my chest, which was probably because she wanted to hide her expression. The hollow expression I had seen for a mere instant before she rushed to me.

“……I didn’t want to die.”

She said with a strained voice while still burying her head in my chest.

“I didn’t want to die on any account. Therefore, therefore, I–”

I put my hand on her back to make her stop speaking.

“Uh, uuuuuh……”

She is crying.

«Yanagi-san» is crying.

Aah–just how selfish am I. Even at such a time, when I ought to support Yuuri-san, I only think about «Yanagi-san».

But listening to a girl’s lamentations while embracing her - at that time she forced such situations upon me countless times.

Since she made me remember those feelings, I got a delusion–

–that I was now having the same feelings I had once had for «Nana Yanagi».

Aah, her tears soak her uniform. What a waste…

I want to drink them.

“__”

Self-hatred arose in me for having such thoughts.

What am I thinking? Didn’t I decide not to repeat such a thing anymore?

I definitely can’t be allowed to do such a thing to another person. I mustn’t repeat the same failure as with my failed love.

I won’t – let someone who doesn’t even love me depend on me anymore.

And yet,

“I, love you.”

She said that with her face buried in my chest.

“I love you. I love you, Kazuki-san. Therefore, I absolutely didn’t want him to do such things to me.”

“—–ah”

After «Nana Yanagi» had gone missing, there was a question I pondered over, each day, over and over:

If she had said she loved me,
would the outcome have been a different one?

I had known that was just a coward’s delusion in order to justify my sin. But even while I had been aware of that, I wanted to know.

I had wanted to know the answer to that assumption.

“……I love you……”

«Yanagi-san» says she loves me.

Unless I betray her now, she will surely accept me. If that results in happiness–

Will I be released from that past?

“…Sorry, for being that sudden.”

She finally raised her head. Her eyes weren’t hollow anymore, but had reddened due to her tears. Her will was firmly dwelling in them.

She walked away from me and sat down on the bed. I sat down next to her.

On top of this bed, Yuuri-san was–

Before I could think further, she laid her hand on my right hand. I took this hand of hers and grasped it tightly.

“…I don’t want to go through that again… no matter what.”

“…Mhm.”

Her pain was conveyed all too well.

“……I’m going to say something horrible now. But please… don’t hate me.”

“I won’t hate you!”

She murmured while looking really anxious whether I would start to hate her.

“Save, me.”

“–that’s horrible…?”

She nodded slightly.

“I want you to save me with maximum priority. Do you understand what that means?”

I was still amazed, so she added with a downcast look,

“You are the [Revolutionary], aren’t you, Kazuki-san?”

Ahh, so that’s what she was getting at.

“You want me to kill Koudai Kamiuchi?”

When I worded it straight-out, she kept quiet.

“But you know, killing is–”

“–even I!”

She interrupted me with a shout. I was taken aback by that and she awkwardly looked down.

“Even I… would want to use another means. I don’t wish for a solution that requires us to kill someone. But is there another one? Is there another way where I don’t have to go through that a second time and where we can survive? Or… do you actually want to tell me that it’s still possible to persuade him?”

“Well–”

I couldn’t say it. Even I knew that it was not possible anymore to persuade him.

But is that enough reason to condemn him to death with my own judgment?

…no way. No matter how inexcusable he is, no matter how many reasons there are that would justify his death, no matter if everything points out it’s right, the instant I become a murderer my life will take a complete turn.

And I won’t be able to return to my everyday life anymore.

So, I can’t do it.

And although I can’t do it–

“Don’t betray me.”

I,

I’ve been waiting for this opportunity all this time. I’ve always been waiting for the opportunity to repeat that past over again.

To tell the truth, I had noticed it.

I had noticed that Nana Yanagi’s attitude wasn’t just because she wanted me to comfort her about Touji.

She truly was beyond help, but even she had noticed that her love towards Touji was distorted. She wanted to love someone else properly.

Unable to deal with her feelings towards Touji, she made me lick her tears. She made me remember her taste. And that way my heart was stolen, just as planned.

I also think the method she had employed was wrong.

But it’s not like those feelings were false.

I had noticed what she wanted. I had noticed it, but pretended I had not.

After all, I was Touji’s best friend, and Yanagi-san was his girlfriend. Therefore I wasn’t even allowed to admit my love towards her.

There was no way I could have done what Yanagi-san wished from me.

But that doesn’t change the fact that I had noticed her feelings. The fact that I had noticed and intentionally ignored them doesn’t change. The fact that I abandoned her doesn’t change.

Thus, it is my sin after all.

«Yanagi-san» closed her swollen eyes and turned her lips towards me.

Her expression did resemble «Nana Yanagi’s».

I could no longer pretend not to notice it.

I had to answer «Yanagi-san’s» feelings.

I grasped both of her shoulders, making them jerk lightly. I closed my eyes and approached her lips–

–that’s wrong.

I didn’t draw any closer toward her lips and opened my eyes.

I didn’t know from where those sudden words originated. Neither did I know why I thought like that.

Just, those few words sounded like her.

Maria.

……that’s so irresponsible of you, Maria! So what would you do instead?

But the outcome wouldn’t change even if I cursed at her in my mind. I couldn’t do what «Yanagi-san» wished from me anymore.

«Yanagi-san» was waiting for my kiss. After some hesitation, I kissed her on the cheek. When she opened her eyes again she smiled contentedly anyway.

The kiss had the taste of tears.

But it was kind of strange.

My thirst was not satisfied by them.

▶Sixth Day <C> [Kazuki Hoshino]‘s room

Even while I was thinking about what to do, things were progressing.

«[Iroha Shindou] was executed because she did not abide by the timetable»

- [Iroha Shindou], executed because she didn’t return to her room until 17:40. Death by beheading.

▶Sixth Day <D> Big room

There were two jute bags on the table in the big room. The contents were the same as in mine, but the colors of the watches were different. The colors were black and orange. The colors Daiya and Iroha-san had worn.

The two days' leftover rations, in total four days', were of course taken by Koudai Kamiuchi.

But even while seeing that, Iroha-san's death still seemed unreal to me.

In the first place, she died because she could not obey the time schedule? Is that even possible, I mean, Noitan even comes to tell us it's time?

"A clear case of suicide."

Koudai Kamiuchi said.

"She couldn't endure this situation and let herself willingly get executed by not moving. Probably because she'd rather die than be eaten by me or something. Whoa, I'm already getting refused again after Maricchi, these girls are so rude…"

Iroha-san commited suicide? That Iroha-san?

This felt just too wrong. I had spent only a few days with her, but I could not believe she would make such a choice.

Yuuri-san seemed to have trouble realizing her death as well. She had taken the orange watch in hand and was eyeing it dumbfoundedly. Maria watched her suspiciously.

"Yanagi."

Yuuri-san reacted to Maria's call, still absentminded.

"Aren't you sad?"

Only when she was told that, emotions started to well up in her expression. When tears started to wet her eyes, she crouched down and gazed at the ground.

"……"

Maria seemed unable to endure watching her like that and averted her eyes

after shaking her head.

“How kind of you to teach her when to cry, Maricchi.”

“…hmpf.”

Koudai Kamiuchi sneered when Maria exposed her aversion openly,

“How cooold. …by the way, Hoshino-senpai.”

He shifted his gaze to me.

“You’re the [Revolutionary], right? So you’d be able to kill me in the next timeblock. Which happens to mean that I have to kill you during this block–”

–Dong.

He thrust his knife into the table.

“Do you want to try resisting? By all means, go ahead! Well, I’ll use the knife while you only have your bare hands, though. Ah, you might as well attack me with the whole bunch, if you want?”

“……three against one?”

“If you think you can win, please go ahead.”

…impossible. No matter how much Maria has refined her martial arts, she lacks strength. I don’t think we could win against the armed Koudai Kamiuchi with violence unless we have some kind of agreement. And even then…

“In other words, it’s already been decided that you’re going to die, Senpai.”

Koudai Kamiuchi pulled the knife out of the table. Then he pointed it towards me and raised the corners of his mouth.

“–or so you thought.”

Unable to comprehend his behavior, I became dumbfounded.

He then guffawed because my expression was apparently funny.

“I wondered: isn’t it boring if it’s my overwhelming victory like this? We might as well make it a little more entertaining, don’t you agree?”

I have no idea what that guy was saying. I didn’t care about victory or defeat, entertaining or boring.

“Let’s make a bet.”

He continued, completely ignoring my frown.

“Let me confirm that again: you can use the [Assassination] command in the next <E>-block, right? I came to the conclusion that you won’t [assassinate]

me. Therefore, I'll bet on that."

"……?"

"As-I-said, I will naturally die if you [assassinate] me, right? If that happens, I lose of course. So let's conversely make it my victory when you let the time pass without doing it. That's all."

"…I don't get you! What's with such a bet? You don't profit in any way, do you? Do you want to be [assassinated] by me or what?"

"Of course not. Haven't I said it? It's not funny if my victory is that overwhelming!"

"That's exactly what I don't get!"

"Aah… umm, let's see. Taking a risk itself feels exciting - do you understand?"

I could only frown.

"For example, let's say that I entered the world cup, which is impossible of course, but anyway: I manage to make a goal. My team wins. In that case I become a superstar, no matter what kind of loser I actually am. However, if I contrarily let the enemy land a goal and Japan loses because of that, I'd be hated by numerous people and would become a villain."

Indeed, that would be a high-risk-high-return match. Almost like a gamble.

"You're the type that would want to avoid such a match, right, Senpai? Because you fear being hated by so many people. But I'm the opposite! It'd be pure adrenaline. I'd love to do it."

…I see, I think I get it. But–

"…it's strange to… bet one's life!"

"Well, it might indeed be overdoing it."

"In the first place, what do you gain from betting your life?"

"There's a «reward», isn't there?"

"Eh?"

I had never heard of such a thing.

"I've been aiming for that «reward» from the start! I think I've also mentioned it at that time."

I still remembered his first words. I remembered having read it several times on my portable terminal. Surely, it was–

«‘Morning. …Oh, there are a whole three hotties! Lucky me!»

“……wait…”

“I’ve already received one!☆”

I had thought no one would possibly wish for [Kingdom Royale] to start. I had been completely sure I was right on that.

But I was wrong. Koudai Kamiuchi had been enjoying this situation from the very beginning.

“I can’t understand you. There is no consistency in your actions. What on earth do you want after all?”

“They often say that about me!”

He answered Maria with a broad grin.

“‘What do you want to do’, ‘get yourself a goal’, ‘be serious’ - mind your own business! Isn’t that all indifferent? I am better than those preachers. Just spare me their envy!”

“I see. You’re a real idiot.”

“Watch your mouth!”

Maria obediently kept quiet when he suddenly rebuked her in a cold tone.

“Alright, let’s get back to our bet, Hoshino-senpai. We bet our lives - you got that, right? So let’s talk about the price. Since I’m so gracious as to do this even though I would have won originally, I’m the only one who gets one, okay?”

He wouldn’t allow me to reject anyway.

“All you have to do is to show me a good performance!”

I had known it could not be anything upright. But–

“Just show me how you get killed by Yuuri-chan.”

But his demand exceeded all my expectations.

“……what do you mean?”

“Exactly as I said it. If I win, we’ll all naturally be able to reach tomorrow’s <C>-block unhurt. Then I’ll again be able to enjoy my fun time with Yuuri-chan in our [Secret Meeting]. Well, I’ll cooperate with Yuuri-chan then and [murder] you, Senpai.”

“What are you saying? Yuuri-san is the [Prince], isn’t she?”

“She’s the [King]!”

Koudai Kamiuchi declared coolly.

“Eh? That can’t–”

I stopped mid-sentence. Yuuri-san was looking up to me with a pale face.

“…Yuuri-san…?”

“I-It’s not like this… don’t get me wrong, Kazuki-san!”

Why? Why does she already excuse herself though I haven’t said anything yet?

“In short, it’s like this: Yuuri-chan faked her [class]. She exchanged [classes] with Kaichou.”

“…for what purpose?”

“To survive, of course!”

Yuuri-san’s pale expression told me that this was the truth.

“There’s no way Yuuri-chan would be able to resist my threat, as she wants to survive so badly that she uses such tricks! I’ll be able to [murder] you with ease.”

“……I won’t.”

Yuuri-san whispered.

Koudai Kamiuchi sneered at her, acting surprised.

“You won’t use [Murder]? Hehe, you will!”

“…D-Don’t make a fool of me. I would never do such a thing to Kazuki-san, and I couldn’t, either. So why can you claim that with so much confidence…?”

“No, I mean, you are a girl that submitted her own body in order to survive, aren’t you? Yuuri-chan?”

Yuuri-san didn’t reply and tensed up.

“Yuuri-chan will definitely kill in order to survive!”

“I would no–”

“Hey, shall I tell them how you begged to me for your life?”

Yuuri-chan widened her eyes.

“Our pure-hearted boy might not like you anymore if he heard what kind of things you said to me.”

“……stop.”

“Truly amazing. You have no pride at all, do you? Since I’m just a pure junior who had an illusion of girls, it was quite a shock for me~.”

“S….top, stop, stop…!! Don’t say it!!”

Yuuri-san burst out in tears right there.

“You sure cry quickly… Don’t worry! I was just joking!”

Of course she didn’t stop crying. Koudai Kamiuchi lifted his arms, “My, my.”

“Well, it’s your decision whether you believe her or not. I suggest you don’t!”

Yuuri-san peeked at me while crying.

I felt sorry towards Yuuri-san, but I did think it was possible for her to [murder] me. After all, she even faked her [class]. If she got threatened with death, I doubted she would be able to resist.

Yuuri-san wanted to survive that badly.

“Well, that’s it, concerning our bet. You’ve got no choice but to accept. But surely you don’t mind, right? After all, you won’t lose anything by it.”

After ending this topic on his own, Koudai Kamiuchi suddenly laid his arm around my shoulder and over-familiarly pulled closer, almost like he had done before the murder.

–Huh?

The instant I thought that, he thrust something into the pocket of my pants. When I looked at him, he pressed his index finger against his lips. Because he was embracing my shoulder, Yuuri-san and Maria couldn’t see what had happened.

After achieving his goal, he let go of me again.

I pushed my hand into the pocket and felt something thin.

Paper…? Did he give me a message he doesn’t want the others to see or something…?

“Kazuki.”

I instantly took my hand out of my pocket. Maria continued without going into my behavior,

“I don’t think it’s a problem, but let me say this once again:”

Maria focused her gaze on me and said,

“Don’t kill.”

…Well, yeah. I expected she would say so.

No matter the situation, no matter who it’s about, Maria would never wish for a solution in which someone has to die.

“……I would rather not, as well. But what should we do then? I’m still fine, but you and Yuuri-san will…”

“You want to sacrifice yourself for that sake? Don’t you know? If you kill someone, even if it’s by [Assassination], it will shackle you for the rest of your life.”

I was aware of that.

As soon I killed Koudai Kamiuchi, I would not be able to return to my everyday life anymore.

But–

«Don’t betray me.»

Yuuri-san was still crying.

When I saw her like that, the words I had once said came back to my mind.

«I can’t stand your company anymore.»

I won’t do something like that anymore.

I won’t make that mistake a second time. Therefore, I have to–

“You don’t have to think about saving us, Kazuki.”

I averted my eyes because I felt caught.

“You don’t have to sacrifice yourself for such a thing. Just think about protecting your own life.”

“…But if I lose the bet, I’m going to get killed?”

“Don’t worry.”

Maria said as if it was a matter of course,

“I will protect you, Kazuki.”

▶Sixth Day <E> [Kazuki Hoshino]‘s room

Before even looking at the memo, I knew it wouldn’t contain anything good.

«Everything will be solved if you kill Yuuri-chan!»

But I hadn’t expected such a stupid message.

Sure, Yuuri-san’s [class] is opposing mine, since I’m the [Revolutionary]. It’s the same for Koudai Kamiuchi, who is the [Knight]. On the other hand, the [Revolutionary] and the [Knight] can coexist. In terms of the game, it’s pointless to kill him.

So what?

Did he bet with me because he concluded that I would [assassinate] Yuuri-san if he gave me this memo or what?

Stop belittling me like that.

I crumpled the memo up and threw it onto the table. Then I looked at the monitor.

«Please select a target for [Assassination]»

I remembered how I thought I would never select something like that on the first day.

But–

I didn’t know anymore. I had no idea what to do.

But it was clear that no one would be saved unless I did something.

…So am I supposed to kill Koudai Kamiuchi after all?

That means to give in to the ‘box’. To lose. And–to not return to my everyday life a second time.

But does that even matter anymore? After all, if I manage to save «Yanagi-san», the everyday life I was so tenacious about might become indifferent.

That’s right! If I can undo that mistake, if I can make a fresh start together

with «Yanagi-san», I–

I–don't mind abandoning my everyday life.

I stretched my hand out to the monitor.

Too bad, Koudai Kamiuchi, but I've won the bet! I will save «Yanagi-san». I will be fine with that. That's justice to me.

So, it's okay, right, Maria? You're okay with that outcome, right?

I asked with the expectation that the Maria in me would answer in my favor.

But what she said was–

«I will protect you, Kazuki.»

–the words she had said before.

"……ah."

I stopped my hand because I noticed that something about those words felt strange.

Right, why did she say something like that…? Did I perhaps overlook anything?

–Aah, right. Come to think of it, what was the reason for Iroha-san's death?

Iroha-san would never give her life up so easily. There's something wrong about that…

But what if she was already on the verge of death at the time she was executed? Or else, what if her death was already decided at that time?

I took my portable terminal and checked the rules.

Even if one got selected as the target of [Deathblow], it wouldn't be executed until 17:55. Iroha-san had died at 17:40. If, at that time, she had known that she would be killed by [Deathblow]…

Wouldn't she have sent us a message?

……No, that can't be after all. Iroha-san was the [King]. There's no way she would select herself as the target for [Murder]–

–Wait, that's wrong. It's different. Iroha-san was the [Prince].

The [King], who can select the target for [Murder], is–

–Yuuri Yanagi.

No, no, that’s impossible. Don’t jump to a hasty conclusion. It’s only a thought of mine from my current point of view that this was a message from Iroha-san.

But,

I checked on the portable terminal.

There was no doubt. Right until her death–Iroha-san had been in a [Secret Meeting] with Yuuri-san.

Iroha-san hadn’t abode by the schedule and had been executed. Because she hadn’t returned to her room until 17:40. Because she had not returned from Yuuri-san’s room to her own.

In short–

Yuuri-san had witnessed Iroha-san’s death before her very eyes.

«Aren’t you sad?»

That was the question Maria had posed to Yuuri-san, who had been watching the orange watch. Then, Yuuri-san had started to cry as if the dam had finally been broken.

As if she had remembered that she was supposed to cry.

«I didn’t want to die on any account. Therefore, therefore, I–»

Because she doesn’t want to die?

Because she doesn’t want to die.

«I love you. I love you, Kazuki-san.»

“……”

I stretched my hand out to the table. I unfolded the memo I had crumpled up.

«Everything will be solved if you kill Yuuri-chan!»

…Let’s assume I killed Koudai Kamiuchi. Of course the game would still continue because I’m the [Revolutionary], Maria’s [The Double] and Yuuri-san’s the [King].

So what will she do then? What will Yuuri-san do when she doesn’t want to die on any account?

Koudai Kamiuchi had said it.

«Yuuri-chan will definitely kill in order to survive!»

I suppressed my chest that was throbbing wildly.

«Don’t kill.»

Why didn’t Maria add «Koudai Kamiuchi» to the end of that sentence?

I reluctantly took out my portable terminal. Then I replayed Maria’s words.

«I will protect you, Kazuki.»

No matter how often I listened to the recording, the words didn’t change. Maria had known. So that’s why she, although Yuuri-san had been crying, although she should have wanted to save everyone, had not said:

«I will protect you all.»

I understood why she hadn’t said that.

And then, I–

▶Seventh Day <B> Big room

“I won.”

I lost the bet against Koudai Kamiuchi.

▶Seventh Day <C> [Secret Meeting] with [Koudai Kamiuchi], [Kazuki Hoshino]‘s room

~~[Iroha Shindou]~~	dead		
[Yuuri Yanagi]	->	**[Kazuki Hoshino]**	15:40~16:40
~~[Daiya Oomine]~~	dead		
[Kazuki Hoshino]	->	**[Yuuri Yanagi]**	15:40~16:40
[Koudai Kamiuchi]	->	**[Kazuki Hoshino]**	15:00~15:30
[Maria Otonashi]	->	**[Kazuki Hoshino]**	16:50~17:20

I never thought he would choose me for the [Secret Meeting].

“Heh, judging from your face, you did not [assassinate] me because you noticed the truth, right?”

Though his life had been at stake, Koudai Kamiuchi spoke to me leisurely as always.

“…did you have confidence?”

He smiled lightly.

“No way! Didn’t I tell you? I enjoy the risk!”

His mental structure was a riddle to me after all.

“So, now you want me to assist you in killing Yuuri-chan? …no way, huh. If you did, you’d have killed her yesterday already. Uhihi, Yuuri-chan was quite flustered when I disclosed that she’s ready to kill you, wasn’t she, Senpai?… that sure was cute.”

“…Why?”

“Mh?”

“Why did you write it like that? Why didn’t you just spell out what she was doing?”

Koudai Kamiuchi answered coolly,

“I can’t do that.”

“But why?!”

“Well, because I fell in love with her.”

I first thought that was just another joke. But his eyes weren’t lying.

“…but you noticed that you were being used, huh? You also noticed that she’s going to kill you, right?”

“Well, yeah.”

“And you’re still in love with her?”

“That’s what I’m saying the whole time.”

That’s just weird. It’s not normal to think like that.

“What’s with that face? Didn’t she do something similar to you as well? You should understand my feelings, then.”

“There’s no way I could u–”

“So Senpai, did you think about killing her even for a moment?”

“…I,”

I closed my mouth subconsciously. No, he had to be mistaken. I would not kill, no matter who the target is.

But it was true that I had been on the brink of killing him while not thinking a tiny bit about killing Yuuri-san. And even now that he pointed it out, I still didn’t want to.

“Even while being deceived, one is still charmed by Yuuri-chan. That applies to the both of us, right? Because we can understand that she wants to survive so well, we want to forgive her. …well, in short, we still continue to be deceived although we noticed it. Hah… geez, Yuuri-chan really is too strong at this game.”

…we still continue to be deceived.

…I guess so. I’m still thinking that Koudai Kamiuchi might just be making this up in order to deceive me. I want him to.

Therefore, in order to free myself from that naive thought, I asked him further,

“…Since when have you been cooperating with Yuuri-san?”

“Since the [Secret Meeting] on the first day! Playing the bad guy at that time

was also a request by Yuuri-chan.”

So it had really been since the very start. Yuuri-san had been groping for a way to survive already at the very start, already at the time she was pale.

“…was it Yuuri-san’s instruction to kill Daiya as well?”

“Well, yeah. It seems Yuuri-chan pretty much believed that story about the ‘boxes’, and seriously thought that it would end with Oomine-senpai’s death.”

“She believed the story about the ‘boxes’…?”

Although she denied their existence all that time…? Aah, I see. That was a performance to avoid being doubted by the rest of us as well.

“Do you remember that I was looking at my portable terminal at that time, right before I did it? Actually, I was re-reading Yuuri-chan’s instructions!”

“…how detailed did she instruct you?”

“She roughly specified how I should act. Basically she wanted to make sure that she wouldn’t get doubted, you see. Well, that’s not the reason she gave me, though.”

Yuuri-san had smiled happily until Kamiuchi-kun caused that incident.

Even though she had known what would happen.

“……Maria…”

“Mh?”

“Why did Maria keep quiet despite knowing that Yuuri-san was involved in it?”

“Ah, you even noticed that?”

Maria had a [Secret Meeting] with Koudai Kamiuchi before that. So he forced her to keep quiet about it somehow?

“To tell the truth, Maricchi had already noticed yesterday. She wasn’t convinced, though, and only suspected her. Then, she questioned me about Yuuri-chan’s involvement in our [Secret Meeting].”

I suddenly remembered Maria’s statement.

«……what I want to say is… you have already spent four [Secret Meetings] with Yanagi, right?»

“……don’t tell me,”

Did Maria doubt Yuuri-san already at that time? Did she suspect Yuuri-san’s behavior when she subtly urged me for a [Secret Meeting] with her?

But I was unable to notice Maria's warning and still had a [Secret Meeting] with Yuuri-san. Because I was captured by my past with «Yanagi-san».

And that led to this worst-case situation.

"But don't you think Maricchi's too frank? Didn't she fear for her own safety when she asked me about Yuuri-chan?"

I could only agree with him, but that was the only way Maria could attack.

"Well, since I didn't think I could keep it a secret anymore, I just told her almost the whole truth. Ah, as you guessed, I also made sure she would keep quiet about it."

"…How? Maria can't be threatened that easily! Even if her own life was at stake, she wouldn't obey such a threat!"

"I guess so. She doesn't obey no matter what you threaten her with. – therefore, I threatened her with doing something to you, Hoshino-senpai."

"……eh?"

"No, I hadn't planned to do that, really. I simply announced to her that I would kill you next, Hoshino-senpai. Then she made that proposal herself: «I'll keep quiet about the truth as you want, so don't harm Kazuki. You can kill me instead.» Really, how brave."

–Aah, I see now.

«I will protect you, Kazuki.»

That's what those words meant.

"I agreed to it. Well, I don't intend to stick to it, though. Or do you see a sense in it? I mean, Yuuri-chan can't leave the [Revolutionary] opposing her alive anyway."

…Maria has been more than enough aware of that. She certainly knew that her sacrifice wouldn't solve anything.

But still Maria can't abandon me.

Because that's what she takes pride in.

However–

"I wonder if she's surprisingly an idiot… Maricchi, that is."

–Koudai Kamiuchi was unable to comprehend that.

As he lived at a place far away from such pride.

"……Kamiuchi-kun."

“What’s the matter?”

“If Yuuri-san hadn’t given you the instruction to kill Daiya, would you have let him live?”

He answered on the spot.

“No way.”

That probably wasn’t even a difficult question to him.

“She just gave me the last push. Even if she hadn’t handed me a knife, I would have done something similar, I guess. I mean, it would be idiotic to just wait until the time runs out.”

He continued amusedly,

“When we could enjoy such nice entertainment!”

Aah, I got it.

Yuuri-san’s secret maneuvers don’t matter in that regard. I must not forgive him, whatever happens. On no account.

While I was clenching my fist silently, Koudai Kamiuchi searched his jute bag beside me.

“Since I pity you, I’ll give you this!”

He stretched out that knife.

“……what are you scheming?”

“Take it as a means of self-defence for now. It seems Yuuri-chan doesn’t plan to select the target of [Murder] until the [Secret Meeting] with you. If you kill Yuuri-chan quickly, you might survive.”

“…are you serious?”

“…mh? Is it strange for me to help you? As I said, I’m doing this out of sympathy, really. Consider it a farewell gift from a member of the ‘Victims of Yuuri Yanagi Club’!”

“That’s not it! What I mean is… don’t you love Yuuri-san?”

He stared at me perplexedly as if he had not understood me.

Aah, I see.

He has nothing to protect. It’s like I can’t see a core in his heart. That’s why we couldn’t see consistency in his actions. Silencing Maria and giving me hints at Yuuri-san’s secret manoeuvering didn’t bother him at all.

That was enough. I didn’t feel like talking with him anymore.

“……I don’t need that.”

“Oh well.”

He threw the knife on the table without showing any deeper emotions.

The conversation ended like that. He sat down on the bed and boredly played around with his portable terminal. I sat down on the ground and pressed my head against my knees.

I didn’t want to talk with him anymore, but there was something I had to confirm.

“Kamiuchi-kun.”

I asked him without raising my face.

“Will you kill Yuuri-san after I die?”

Since Yuuri-san and Koudai Kamiuchi were the [King] and the [Knight], they couldn’t survive together. If he wanted to win the game, he had to kill her.

He answered,

“Honestly speaking, I don’t know.”

With his usual leisure tone. Halfheartedly.

“Isn’t it okay to look at it as another gamble?”

I raised my head and looked at his face.

As always, a loose expression was there. Koudai Kamiuchi had not changed at all. He didn’t feel any sin for killing Daiya and Iroha-san whatsoever.

“…hey, Kamiuchi-kun. It’s the first time I’ll say something like this, but I have to get it off my chest.”

“Just come out with it.”

I took a deep breath and braced up as much ill will as possible,

“I hope you get fucking killed by Yuuri-san.”

▶Seventh Day <C> [Secret Meeting] with [Yuuri Yanagi], [Yuuri Yanagi]‘s room

The Yuuri Yanagi I had known already wasn’t there anymore. Any loveliness had disappeared from her white face and what remained was mere exhaustion.

And in her eyes dwelt that blankness.

Those were the eyes she had shown me yesterday before embracing me. I had thought that their origin was the emotional wound she had suffered.

But that was wrong.

That blankness resulted from her suppressing her feelings for a long time in order to act in front of us.

And–I was no longer able to mix her up with «Nana Yanagi» when she was like that.

…no, it wasn’t just about her expression.

Probably, I had already realized that when I kissed her on the cheek.

Probably, I had already realized that when I thought that her tears are different from «Nana Yanagi»‘s, when they didn’t quench my thirst.

I simply gazed at the girl in front of me.

I simply continued to stare at her, without any sign of averting my gaze, but without putting any emotion into it as well.

The pale girl pressed her hands against her chest. She breathed fitfully.

Although I had been trying to keep my gaze free of any emotion, she had figured out its meaning. And she had started to suffer.

–from her awareness of sin.

She wavered slightly and immediately covered her mouth. But her resistance was futile; vomit flowed out through the gaps between her fingers.

“Uh, ghe…”

I was however unable to look after her and simply kept on watching.

Hate her.

Hate her.

I should hate her, who deceived us, who cornered us, who led us into this situation. It would be easier for me if I did. Also, if I perceived her as my enemy, there might still be chances. I need to hate her.

And yet, she lamented to me, looking so shameful.

–It’s painful.

She lamented.

–It’s painful, it’s painful, it’s painful, it’s painful it’s painful it’s painful it’s painful it’s painful it’s painful painful painful painful painful painful painful painful painful.

“__”

So what? Yuuri-san cornered and tormented others as well. She deserves to suffer like this now. Looking that painful might even be another of her tricks. Wouldn’t it be downright idiotic to feel sympathy for her?

And yet–

“……Are you okay?”

I spoke those kind words to her and stroked her back.

“…I’m, sorry.”

Come to think of it, she had always been apologizing.

“I’m sorry.”

After her default apology she continued,

“But I’m still going to kill you, Kazuki-san.”

I know that!

Of course you wouldn’t let go of your life after hurting yourself so much to keep it.

“……Yuuri-san, you’d better lie down.”

When I suggested that, even feeling compassion for her, she followed my advice obediently and lay down on the bed. But she didn’t turn her head to me.

She asked me like that,

“……Won’t you offer resistance?”

“I won’t.”

I myself was surprised by my distinct words. Though I had been unsure whether to oppose her or not, I managed to answer her question on the spot.

But it was probably okay like that. Those reflexive words were certain to be my final answer.

“…so why did you want to have a [Secret Meeting] with me?”

“Because I have one wish.”

Then I told her why I didn’t select Maria, but her to be my partner for the [Secret Meeting],

“Don’t kill Maria.”

I noticed Yuuri-san breathe in, in surprise.

“…Why do you think I’d kill Otonashi-san? I mean, I’m the [King] and Otonashi-san is [The Double]. In regard to the game, she has a [class] I don’t need to kill in order to survive.”

“You tried to make me kill Koudai Kamiuchi, right?”

“……Yes.”

“Even if I killed him, the game would not end. However, you would become unable to make him kill me. Hence, no matter who you use to kill, in the end you have to get rid of the remaining one with your own hands. So, I wonder: why did you particularly want me to kill him?”

Yuuri-san kept quiet, but I had found the answer myself,

“Because it’s easy to kill someone like me, right?”

Her head twitched slightly.

“It would be too risky to save him for last, since you have to kill the remaining one with a knife. But in my case, there’s almost no danger for you. Hence, you wanted to save me. Or am I wrong?”

Yuuri-san kept silent for a while, but at last she answered properly,

“……you’re right.”

It was still a shock that she admitted it. But I hid those feelings and continued,

“But now you’ll have to kill Koudai Kamiuchi yourself. On top of that you even need to do it directly with a knife, though you have no chances of

winning against him in a direct confrontation. So what are you going to do, I wonder? How would you raise your chance of survival?”

“……”

“…I think you already understand what I want to say, right? In order to raise your chance of survival–you will use Maria Otonashi.”

Yuuri-san curled her body up.

“Well, I don’t know how exactly you plan to use her! Just, it’s unreasonable to think you would start to restrain yourself after having done all that. Yuuri-san, at worst you would even kill Maria in order to survive.”

I drew closer to her face and looked into her eyes.

“Therefore, please.”

I repeated my words.

“Don’t kill Maria.”

I wouldn’t let her avert her eyes. I had to make her promise this.

The girl with a blank look answered, looking slightly frightened,

“…It’s easy to promise that. I just need to say it, even if it’s a lie.”

“……Mh?”

“I mean, you have no means to confirm whether I abide by it, because you’ll be dead when I would use Otonashi-san. So isn’t it pointless to promise something like that now? By now you should be aware that I lie if I need to.”

Although she’d just need to make the promise, she intentionally gave me advice.

“…you’re different from Koudai Kamiuchi.”

“Eh?”

“You have a proper awareness of sin. Therefore, you’re going to give in to my threat.”

Threat. She widened her eyes because I had used such a word.

“If you kill Maria–I will ruin your life.”

I won’t be alive anymore when Yuuri-san breaks our promise. But that doesn’t mean I can’t threaten her.

I just need to prepare something that will be invoked when she breaks the promise.

“If you kill Maria, I will curse you and torment you until the end of your life. I will become a spirit that throws curses at you all day long. I won’t let you forget the fact that you’re a murderer even for a single moment. By doing so I will make you lose the meaning of life and erase you.”

Upon hearing the determination in my voice, Yuuri-san contorted her face to one that was either smiling or about to cry…I couldn’t judge.

“She’s important to you, huh.”

She whispered.

“Otonashi-san’s very important to you, isn’t she?”

I was relieved that she had understood my intent.

“Yeah… therefore I won’t forgive you if you kill her.”

This threat could only work because Yuuri-san had an awareness of sin.

Now she was going to fall prey to her feelings of guilt at the moment she’d kill Maria.

So she wouldn’t kill Maria anymore.

I stepped back from the bed and sat on the table.

“…So, why did you want to have a [Secret Meeting] with me, Yuuri-san?”

“……”

“You selected me as the partner of your [Secret Meeting], didn’t you?”

I gazed at her from the table.

“Indeed. …I did.”

She shifted her gaze to the ceiling.

“There’s one last thing I wanted to tell you. It may be hard to listen to, but can I tell you about my misdeeds? …well, it seems you know most of it already, though.”

“…As a confession?”

“No. It would be easier for me to keep it hidden, after all.”

“Why then?”

“Because it will help you.”

I frowned.

“It will help me? What will?”

“The details about how I created this situation will help you.”

I didn’t get it. Wouldn’t I die shortly after? What might help me or not didn’t matter anymore.

But Yuuri-san didn’t elaborate on her reasoning and began her talk,

“I thought about ways to survive since I arrived in [Kingdom Royale].”

Her voice was trembling. As it seemed, she really didn’t want to talk about it.

“While fearing for my life, I thought about how I could raise my chance of surviving. In other words, I planned to become the winner of this murder-game at that time. The conclusion I came to was to first make the others my allies for the time being.

I especially wanted the [Revolutionary] and the [Sorcerer] on my side. Hence, I wanted to know who had those [classes]. For that sake, I intended to propose a coming-out of the [classes]. But surprisingly, Oomine-san proposed it instead.”

“You wanted the [Revolutionary] and the [Sorcerer] on your side–”

“–in order to kill.”

She declared so unhesitatingly. …maybe she had become a little bit too frank about her deeds.

“But the [Sorcerer] was Oomine-kun and he didn’t want to become my ally. I suppose he saw through my acting that allowed me to let tears flow like a faucet. And the [Revolutionary] was you, Kazuki-san. But you wouldn’t be able to kill anyone even if I asked you to.”

“Thus, you made Kamiuchi-kun, the [Knight], your ally…? But your decision was quick, wasn’t it? He told me that he had already received some instructions on the first day.”

“It was… well, obvious that he had a crush on me. I’m pretty sensitive to such things. Therefore, I quickly made him my ally and had him throw a tantrum to raise the tension.”

“Why was there a need to do that?”

“To make the rest of you want to do something quickly. If they feel threatened, people want to make a plan against it. By doing so I made you want to do a coming-out.”

I see… indeed, if everyone concluded that such a killer-game could not happen, there would be no need to do anything new.

“I concluded that the story about the ‘boxes’ is true. Therefore, I had to get rid

of Oomine-san.”

“That’s why you made Koudai Kamiuchi kill him?”

“Yes. But [Kingdom Royale] didn’t stop when Oomine-san died. Thus, I shifted my goal from killing the ‘owner’ to winning the game. –you overall know the rest, right?”

I nodded. I was confident to have understood it in general. …But I still had one more question.

“Then what about Iroha-san…? I assumed the way she died might have been a message, but what exactly happened?”

I saw clearly that Yuuri-san’s face tensed up.

I comprehended from her expression that Iroha-san’s death was something special to her. Although she had spoken so boldly about her actions, this matter apparently caused some reluctance in her.

Yuuri-san bit on her lip once, but then she spoke,

“…I think it’s as you presumed. We selected Iroha as a target for [Murder]. And when Iroha came to know, she died like that to leave behind a message to tell you and Otonashi-san about my secret maneuvering.”

She willingly suppressed her feelings and spoke in a plain voice.

Suddenly, I noticed a certain thing. The watch she was wearing on the right wrist. Her original watch had been beige-colored. But–her present one was orange.

“Even in this game… I can still not win… against Iroha…”

And then she fell into silence.

I had the hunch that she would not answer any more questions about Iroha-san.

Therefore, I stopped pressing her on that matter any further.

“Okay, I understood what you did secretly…. but I still don’t understand how this should help me?”

To this question, Yuuri-san raised herself up from the bed and gazed at me with those blank eyes.

“……Why do you think I believed the story about the ‘box’?”

“Eh?”

“Can you please believe what I’m going to say now? …No, sorry. After

betraying you like that, it's stupid to expect you could still believe me, isn't it?"

She continued hesitatingly,

"But since you asked me, I'll tell you. Unlike everyone else, I can remember what happened right before we arrived here."

"—!!"

I widened my eyes confronted with those unexpected words.

"There, I received an explanation from the 'owner'. He told me that I would be going to play a killer-game called [Kingdom Royale]."

The 'owner'…? So she knew the 'owner', the wirepuller of [Kingdom Royale], from the very start?

"…who is that 'owner'…?"

Yuuri-san answered me,

"It's Oomine-san."

Daiya is the 'owner'…?

I held my breath. Honestly, it wasn't unexpected. Rather, it was only natural that it was him. She probably believed Maria because she knew that Daiya was the 'owner'. But–

"But–the 'box' wasn't destroyed in spite of Daiya's death."

Right, if Daiya had been the 'owner', this 'Game of Idleness' would have ended already.

"As I told you previously, I also thought it would end like that. But as you see, it didn't. By that I immediately came across the answer."

She said,

"The Oomine-san that was here – was not «Daiya Oomine»."

"……What are you talking about? So what on earth was that Daiya?"

"Well–"

But Yuuri-san hesitated.

"…I'm sorry, but I'd rather not tell you. If I said it now, you probably would not believe me anyway. But think about it just for once: it can't be called a proof, but the Oomine-san here had no self-awareness of being the 'owner' of this 'box', right?"

"Well, probably…"

If he had been self-aware, he would not have let himself get killed like that.

But even if that was true, that didn't mean that Yuuri-san was telling the truth. I couldn't judge how much of her words were true.

"Yuuri-san, I'll die soon, right?"

"Yes."

"So when I can't fully believe you now, when on earth will I be able to?"

This question was probably a bit mean, as there could be no answer.

However, she answered on the spot.

"At the moment when it's your turn."

"My turn…? What turn…?"

But she didn't answer anymore. That was probably another matter I «couldn't believe now».

Maybe–[Kingdom Royale] won't end even after she won and I died? Will it be started over again? But until when?

Don't tell me until the 'owner' is satisfied…?

"Will we have to fight against each other like this again…?"

Yuuri-san averted her eyes when I said so.

Instead of the answer she told me,

"…Kazuki-san, I have one wish. Will you listen?"

With a face that seemed to be on the verge of crying.

"Yeah, I'll listen."

She flashed a spiritless smile and said,

"Thank you very much. So, please make a promise. Next time, the time after next time or even the last time, anyway, sometime your turn will come without fail. At that time, we're certain to confront each other again. At that time–"

She stood up and staggeringly walked to me.

"At that time–"

Tears started to flow from her eyes.

"–please kill me."

Then she clung to me. However, rather than embracing me, she just leaned against me.

“Absolutely, absolutely, kill me, please. If you don’t, I won’t be able to forgive myself. No… I can’t forgive myself already, but then, it would be even more so. So please kill me. And let me meet you again afterwards. Please. Please, please, please–”

“–Don’t betray me.”

Then, I realized.

Maybe I could start over again. Maybe there still was a chance to survive.

However–I could not save «Yanagi-san».

Looking at her, I recalled «Nana Yanagi» once more.

I had mixed up «Nana Yanagi» and «Yuuri Yanagi». I had thought that I might be able to change my past by getting attached to and saving Yuuri-san.

Although that was completely unreasonable.

They were different individuals, so saving one couldn’t possibly mean saving the other. I hadn’t noticed that obvious point because I didn’t want to notice.

Because I sought relief.

But I now knew. I couldn’t possibly attain relief in such a ‘box’ that was used by someone to kill time.

“Sorry, but I’ll betray you.”

I told her straightforwardly.

After all I was certain to–forget «Yanagi-san» again.

“Even if it’s my turn, I won’t kill you.”

Maybe Yuuri-san would continue to suffer even when [Kingdom Royale] has ended because of that.

But I had decided.

Without giving in to such a ‘box’ and without giving in to my past with «Nana Yanagi», I would protect.

I would protect myself,

Maria,

and–my everyday life.

…huh, the same conclusion as always.

“I see……”

Whispering so, she retreated to her bed, her face downcast. There, she turned her back to me in order to hide her face. I posed a question towards that back.

“…Can I ask just one more question, too?”

“…What?”

“Do you think you can defeat Koudai Kamiuchi?”

She was going to fight against her last enemy afterwards, Koudai Kamiuchi. She had to kill him directly with a knife, though she had virtually no chance of winning in a proper fight.

“…Of course!”

She turned around after saying so.

“……Ah.”

I was surprised.

Those eyes weren’t blank anymore. The charming smile had returned to her face.

Of course it wasn’t a heartfelt expression. But that was exactly what surprised me.

I was astonished that she could conceal even such horrible suffering perfectly.

“If it were Iroha or Otonashi-san, I could understand your doubts, but there’s no way I would lose to such a little fish, is there?”

She, who had used me without depending on me, unlike «Nana Yanagi», said so sharply.

“I’ll deceive him until the very end and kill him.”

“…I see.”

Though I had been deceived more than enough myself, I couldn’t suppress a laugh. Doing so, I remembered:

«I’m scared… I’m scared…!»

«I didn’t want to die on any account. Therefore, therefore, I–»

«Save, me.»

She had deceived me indeed. But she told surprisingly few lies. After all, she really had been scared, she did suffer and she had sought help.

And–

“Kazuki-san.”

Yuuri Yanagi flashed a smile like when I kissed her on the cheek and said,

“I really did like you, Kazuki-san.”

▶Seventh Day <C> [Secret Meeting] with [Maria Otonashi], [Kazuki Hoshino]‘s room

I told Maria everything I had found out.

No matter how hard it is for her to accept this outcome, she can’t do anything about it.

Yuuri-san has already selected me as the target for [Murder]. Maria knows that nothing can be done against it any more.

Therefore, we were just sitting on the bed, connecting hands. As if to carve the shape of each other’s hand into our mind, we entwined our fingers, correcting our grip over and over, just feeling each other.

Feeling each other for the last time.

“Kazuki.”

Maria called my name.

“Truth be told, there’s something I purposely didn’t tell you.”

“…Eh?”

“I don’t have the ‘Flawed Bliss’ at the present time.”

As I didn’t get what she was talking about, I just gazed at her.

“I suppose that I lost my power temporarily, but I can’t say for sure. I haven’t come upon such a ‘box’ until now, but that might be one of the characteristics of the ‘Game of Idleness’.”

…wasn’t that actually rather important?

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Maria turned her glance slightly downwards and said while entwining our fingers,

“I am not a human, but a ‘box’. I am just a being that exists for the sake of

others. That’s how I always explained it to you. Maria Otonashi… no, Aya Otonashi has to be such a being. And what sustains me, what lets me be like that, is the ‘Flawed Bliss’. However, I cannot use it now. So, what am I?”

“Maria is Maria!”

“……and this is where we ended up, huh.”

Maria gripped my hand so strongly, it almost hurt me.

“Am I not even able to protect just Kazuki…?”

“…Maria.”

“Hah! [The Double]? I wish I’d be able to die in your place, then.”

Maria’s bad habit appeared again.

The bad habit of straightaway disdaining herself.

“…Please stop. I don’t wish for anything like that.”

“I know! I know that this desire serves nothing but my own selfishness!”

I opened my eyes wide when she suddenly shouted at me.

“…Eh?”

Maria was aware of it? She didn’t actually believe that it would help others?

“After all during «that week» you harshly taught me that it’s just my haughtiness…”

She said and scowled at me.

“But still! But still, I’m a ‘box’!”

I was overwhelmed by the intensity of her words and kept silent.

She had noticed it, but she couldn’t change it. Because she held a conviction that was unshakable for her. If she changed that, she wouldn’t be able to stay the person she was anymore.

“……Sorry for shouting at you.”

Maria averted her eyes awkwardly.

“But it’s mortifying. I’m downright unable to accept this outcome.”

“…Don’t worry, Maria. If Yuuri-san’s telling the truth, we can meet again.”

“That doesn’t matter. The fact that you’re going to part from me shortly doesn’t change. I’m certain to lose you now, Kazuki.”

“……Maria.”

Indeed, I can’t believe it either, that I can come back to life.

“…Kazuki, as I said just now, you can’t call me a ‘box’ at the moment. Therefore, I’m unable to protect anyone. Even after this I might have to watch Yanagi suffer, without being able to do anything. In [Kingdom Royale], I’m only a powerless girl.”

After saying that, Maria embraced my head.

“Therefore I think it’s okay to show some of Maria Otonashi’s weakness.”

Close to my ear she whispered.

“I’m sad!”

Her lips slightly touched my ear.

“I can’t bear your death. It breaks my heart. I don’t want that. I want to be with you.”

Suddenly I remembered the scene during the repeating classroom when I had knelt and held my hand out to her.

“I may be powerless. I may be just Maria Otonashi right now. But–”

At that time, she had certainly been a powerless girl as well, though just for an instant.

And similarly, she was a powerless girl in the ‘Game of Idleness’.

“–still, I want to protect you even if I have to pay with my own life.”

I didn’t know what her face looked like when she said that.

But I knew the answer I had to give.

“Sorry.”

After all I had decided at the time when I had chosen Maria, and not «Yanagi-san».

“No matter how hard this may be for you, this time it’s not your job to protect.”

When I had chosen her, who made the me I am now, I had decided.

“It’s my job to protect you when you have lost your ‘box’.”

I had decided to protect Maria.

And like that, to protect my everyday life.

To protect the everyday life Maria didn’t desire.

▶Seventh Day <C> [Kazuki Hoshino]‘s room

And then I was pierced by an invisible blade.

- [Kazuki Hoshino], death by [Deathblow]

********** GAME OVER **********

Winners

[Yuuri Yanagi] (Player)
[*King*], killed Kazuki Hoshino on the seventh day by

selecting him as the target of [Murder]. Killed Koudai Kamiuchi directly on the same day. Alive.
** Victory conditions have been met due to Iroha Shindou, Kazuki Hoshino and Koudai Kamiuchi's death.*

[Maria Otonashi]
[*The Double*], alive.
** Victory conditions have been met due to Iroha Shindou, Kazuki Hoshino's death.*

Losers

[Iroha Shindou]
[*Prince*], executed on the sixth day because of ignoring the time schedule.

[Daiya Oomine]
[*Sorcerer*], carotid artery was directly cut by Koudai Kamiuchi on the sixth day, bled to death.

[Kazuki Hoshino]
[*Revolutionary*], killed on the seventh day by Yuuri Yanagi and Koudai Kamiuchi's [Deathblow].

[Koudai Kamiuchi]
[*Knight*], directly killed Daiya Oomine on the sixth day. Killed Kazuki Hoshino using [Deathblow] on the seventh day. Was stabbed in the stomach by Yuuri Yanagi on the same day, death due to hemorrhagic shock.

GAME START

新藤色葉

音無麻理亜

星野一輝

大嶺醍哉

神内昂大

柳悠里

▶First Day <B> Big room

I heard that it’s a game about killing each other.

I think I also paid an appropriate amount of attention.

But there’s no way I could ever deal with something like this! How should I have imagined that I would hit Game Over right away?

The knife found its way into the flesh of my throat. I was thrown down on the floor and could feel that blood was flowing down my neck.

“Stray thoughts.”

The girl in front of me opened the mouth on her neat face.

“Stray thoughts arose in me when I noticed it’s you, Kazuki-kun. It seems I would actually want to save you. I wonder, does that mean I’m still inexperienced?”

The girl mechanically said incomprehensible stuff, only blinking with her eyes, her empty expression unchanged.

She slightly loosened the pressure of the knife and continued,

“Well, I might as well teach you about me for the sake of your future! I only have time until that asshole Kamiuchi arrives here, so it won’t be long. Tch, too bad he’s going to live. I would have wanted to kill him the most.”

What is that girl talking about…? Who’s Kamiuchi? And in the first place, who’s she? Why does she know my name?

“I neither have astounding physical abilities, nor do I have an outstanding IQ. I have no photographic memory either, nor do I have synesthesia. I have no evident special abilities at all. So, how can I be what I am?”

The blood-stained girl said, still devoid of any expression,

“It’s because I can concentrate.”

She continued plainly,

“For example, foot races. At first I erase all stray thoughts. I cut off thoughts like against whom I could win, how my chances are or what I might achieve by winning. Then I do some light analysis from the condition of the ground

over the condition of my own body, like my white fibers, to today's perfect running form and make a simulation. While doing the crouch start, I only concentrate on the sound. I erase all stray thoughts and just concentrate on the sound of the starting shot. But at only 340m/s, the speed of sound is slow. As a matter of fact, I start sprinting exactly at the same time the shot resounds, but I mustn't imagine it like that. I try to get ahead of the sound in my mind. Then, I run like I simulated beforehand. I don't need any unnecessary thoughts. That's why I have no memories of the time I was running when the race is over."

After finishing she directed her emotionless eyes towards me.

"Aah, sorry. That turned out to be longer than expected. In short, one can evoke 'extraordinary' abilities if one focuses all energy on just one point. And it's just that I'm good at doing that; I'm no superman. Okay, this information will help you, certainly."

What is she talking about? Is she insane?

I noticed that the back of my head felt wet. While I could conjecture what kind of liquid it was, I was unable to confirm it. …I didn't want to.

Instead my eyes found something different.

"Uh, aah–"

Maria's collapsed body.

And not only she was lying there collapsed. There were other slumped bodies as well.

"I think I'm a little angry. On one hand at Koudai Kamiuchi's inhumanity, but mainly at that bitch. She deceived me not only in this game, but just as easily in our daily life."

Despite her words, I couldn't see any anger in her face.

"Did you know? Yuuri went out with him, knowing that I had a crush on him. And on top of that, she didn't even like him herself. She did it just to make me suffer. Isn't that cruel? When someone tells you something like that, it's only natural that you can't do anything but leave a dying message."

I had already given up trying to understand her.

"But I think those emotions have no relation to what I'm doing here. Emotions aren't necessary to win this game after all. And well, I had already finished my preparations when the explanation of [Kingdom Royale] ended."

"……preparations?"

“Yeah–The preparations to maintain concentration until I’ve killed everyone I need to kill in order to win.”

Then, without the slightest change in her expression–

–she killed me.

“I’ll worry about emotions and regrets after everything’s over.”

My carotid artery was cut, whereupon my consciousness instantly started to fade.

And in my fading consciousness I had the feeling of hearing someone’s wailing. I listened to that voice and finally remembered.

Right, that girl is the student council presi…

- [Kazuki Hoshino], carotid artery cut by [Iroha Shindou], dead

********** GAME OVER **********

Winners

[Iroha Shindou] (Player)

[*Sorcerer*], directly killed Yuuri Yanagi, Maria Otonashi, Daiya Oomine and Kazuki Hoshino on the first day. Alive.
** Victory conditions have been met because she brilliantly managed to survive.*

[Koudai Kamiuchi]
[*The Double*], alive.
** Victory conditions have been met due to Kazuki Hoshino and Maria Otonashi's death.*

Losers

[Yuuri Yanagi]
[*Knight*], carotid artery was cut by Iroha Shindou on the first day, bled to death.

[Daiya Oomine]
[*King*], carotid artery was cut by Iroha Shindou on the first day, bled to death.

[Kazuki Hoshino]
[*Prince*], carotid artery was cut by Iroha Shindou on the first day, bled to death.

[Maria Otonashi]
[*Revolutionary*], carotid artery was cut by Iroha Shindou on the first day, bled to death.

The intoxicated swaying stopped and the transparent hands that had pulled me in disappeared.

Before my eyes was an arcade game machine with [Kingdom Royale] written on it.

I had returned to the black room. I felt revulsion against the black air that had stuck to my entire body – and remembered.

Right. Those transparent hands had come out from that game machine and seized me, and–

"Welcome back from that meaningless fight to the death."

Daiya Oomine, the 'owner' of the 'Game of Idleness', was standing before

my eyes.

“How was that [vicarious experience]?”

Daiya said such a thing.

“It was a [vicarious experience]…?”

“Yeah, you actually didn’t experience anything of what happened in [Kingdom Royale] so far yourself. How should I explain it… right, consider it as having experienced something like the memories or the past logs of another player.”

What is he talking about? The memory of other players? But why did I see those memories from my point of view, then?

That was my very own memory!

“It seems you don’t get it.”

“…well, I mean, it was obviously me that was in the–”

“That was an NPC.”

Daiya cut me short.

“…Hah?”

“You don’t even know such simple gaming terms? Listen, that guy, who you thought was yourself, was actually an enemy character controlled by the computer of [Kingdom Royale]. If it had been the real you, you would hardly be here now, would you? After all, you died twice.”

…I don’t get it. An NPC had all those worries I had and suffered like that?

“…That’s a lie! There’s no way my thinking and actions could be imitated that accurately.”

“Doesn’t it prove that it’s a ‘box’ because it *can* do it?”

“…well, that may be so, but…”

Come to think of it, Maria didn’t have her ‘box’. Can that also be explained with her having been an NPC?

“…but for what purpose did you include them?”

“As I told you before, this ‘Game of Idleness’ is a ‘box’ that merely forces people to play [Kingdom Royale] in order to stave off boredom. But [Kingdom Royale] doesn’t start until someone starts killing. And how can it stave off boredom if it doesn’t start? So, here’s my question: how can we make sure that someone definitely kills someone else?”

Without letting me interrupt him, he said,

“Simply create a system that forces you to kill.”

“How does the existence of NPCs ensure that someone will kill?”

“There is only one player in [Kingdom Royale] that fights in the truest sense. The one that dies if he’s defeated. The others are NPCs. Can you follow me?”

I nodded with a frown.

“That player knows that the others are just NPCs. It’s still not easy to bring himself to do it, but he knows that the real person will stay alive even if he kills the corresponding NPC. Contrary, he also knows that he’s the only one that would die for good. So, I wonder: can a player in that position keep himself from killing anyone?”

I recalled what Yuuri-san had told me in the second round.

«I don’t want to die!»

The player of that round had most likely been her. If she had been completely in the dark about the circumstances, would she really have been able to go that far? I doubted it. It was the fact that the others were NPCs that allowed her to take the last step, for sure.

No it was even more obvious in Iroha-san’s case. Because she knew that she wouldn’t steal our chance, she suppressed her emotions and ended the game quickly.

Those three rounds progressed completely differently, just by changing the player. This demonstrated the heavy influence of the player and made clear that the player’s existence really was the key to starting [Kingdom Royale].

“…so why was Yuuri-san so reluctant to kill us and suffered like that? Didn’t she know that we were just NPCs?”

“You’re a piece of trash without imagination, aren’t you? You realize that that NPC is a perfect copy of you, right? Sure, you won’t die yourself if he gets killed. … but that’s as far as it goes.”

“……?”

“Your NPC isn’t any different from you. The personality and everything else is the same as you. Could you easily forgive someone that killed a being that’s identical to you? Or vice versa: could you calmly kill the NPCs identical to the others?”

I closed my mouth.

“You know the answer because you [vicariously experienced] it, right?

Killing the NPC is just like killing the real guy.”

…exactly. My real self’s life had nothing to do with my NPCs. They were exactly the same as me and they were indeed killed by Yuuri-san and Iroha-san.

My NPCs and I were the exact same person but existed separately.

“…Daiya, you mentioned [vicarious experience] a few times. Do you mean that I indirectly experienced what my NPCs experienced through their eyes?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

In that case I hadn’t won or lost in [Kingdom Royale] up to that point.

This was going to be decided now.

I looked at the gaming machine in front of me.

This time I was finally going to start [Kingdom Royale] in the real sense. I was going to start a game in which I wouldn’t recover from death.

“It’s your turn.”

“…the playing order until now was you, Yuuri-san and Iroha-san, right?”

“Yeah, what about it?”

“Where are Yuuri-san and Iroha-san now?”

“They’re in this dark room. They are sleeping… or to be more exact, they are in a stopped condition. You could actually find them here, but it’s pointless since you can’t do anything for them anyway. They will be released when all six players have finished the game.”

“Everyone has survived until now, right?”

“Yeah. Because they won when they were players.”

“…the memory from inside [Kingdom Royale] won’t disappear, I guess?”

“Yeah, it won’t.”

I remembered. Since I didn’t experience it myself, this might not be the correct expression, though… anyway, I remembered.

Yuuri Yanagi’s blank eyes.

Iroha Shindou’s wailing.

Those two suffered and were burdened with sins that they can’t make up for anymore. No matter what I’d do in my round, I was unable to save them.

I couldn’t save those two anymore.

I could only save myself, as they had done.

…no, that wasn’t quite right.

“Daiya.”

“What?”

“When is Maria’s turn?”

Daiya answered me,

“After yours.”

I see, so–

–I can save Maria.

I looked around in this dark room searching for her body. But everything was concealed by that unpleasant darkness, so I could only see the immediate vicinity of the game machine.

Yuuri-san and Iroha-san had given me some hints to win. They had taught me how to defeat them.

But that was no good for me.

The problem was that Maria couldn’t win in this game no matter what. This game required the player to deceive and kill the others, but she could do neither.

She was powerless in the ‘Game of Idleness’.

I had to save her. If I didn’t, to me, she was going to become another «Nana Yanagi».

But what should I do? Even if I won [Kingdom Royale], that would only mean that I survived and not that Maria’s saved.

Right–it was not my goal to win [Kingdom Royale].

It was to destroy this foolish ‘box’; to destroy the ‘Game of Idleness’.

“…what’s with that conceited look, Kazu?”

Daiya frowned at me when I scowled at him.

“You aren’t fair, are you, Daiya?”

“What?”

“I’m saying that you’re unfair.”

Daiya was clearly displeased at those words, just as I had planned.

“How so? I was the very first to play [Kingdom Royale]. Since I wasn’t able to resort to any [vicarious experiences], I was clearly at a disadvantage and had to grope my own way. And still you call me unfair?”

“Our goal is different.”

“What?”

“To me, winning in [Kingdom Royale] doesn’t achieve my goal. It would just mean that I managed to survive. You know that my goal is to return to my everyday life, don’t you?”

“……”

“I become unable to achieve my goal just by killing someone in the game. If [Kingdom Royale] really is a game that only ends if I kill someone, then I definitely can’t achieve my goal. In other words, I can’t win. And you simply shut me into that cage and watch my inevitable death. How can you call that fair?”

Daiya just scowled at me when silently I declared so. I hid my inner anxiety and scowled back at him.

This condition lasted for a while–but then Daiya began to laugh.

“W-What’s so funny?”

“What are you saying? Didn’t you start this staring contest to make me laugh? Aah, yeah yeah, I lost. Your face sure is funny!”

“…tell me already what’s so funny!”

“That’s obvious, isn’t it? I mean, with this provocation you’re clearly trying to get some advantageous conditions out of me.”

“……Ah.”

He had seen through me.

“Please do that when you’ve become as skillful as Yanagi. There’s no way I’d fall for such a crappy performance. You sure are a laughable and foolish guy.”

“Uh–”

Did I fail–?

If Daiya doesn’t change the rules for me, I won’t be able to achieve my goal. So it’s a stalemate, then?

Will I–not be able to save Maria?

“But this seems interesting.”

Daiya said.

“……eh?”

“I’ll accept your challenge. That’s what I’m saying.”

But I was still unable to comprehend and dropped my jaw.

“There is a hidden trick to end [Kingdom Royale] without killing anyone.”

Daiya continued without caring about me. I managed to close my mouth again and concentrated on the conversation with Daiya.

“Do you remember that that green bear said that it would be boring if everyone turned into a mummy?”

I tried to retrace my memory.

«Okay thEn - I wiSh all oF you a - good fight! - Just dOn’t end - the gAme by - doing somEthing - as bOring- as to tuRn - into muMmies everyone - okAy?»

Yeah, he had said so.

“Again, this is a ‘box’ that serves to stave off boredom. A round that ends peacefully without anything happening is unwanted. I haven’t considered an end in which no one has killed anyone, and I also have no interest in such an end. Therefore, if it’s sure that no one will kill, the game will be forced to end. So, if everyone’s food supply runs out and the time comes, the player will be released just like that.”

“In other words–”

“You can survive if nobody kills anyone during those eight days.”

Aah, that’s it.

That can become proof that I managed to win against the ‘box’ and maintain my everyday life.

“And–if you can cause that kind of end, I will destroy the ‘Game of Idleness’. That’s the ‘fair’ you’ve been talking about, right?”

“…really?”

“Have I ever lied to you?”

……very often, actually.

Since it was Daiya, he would keep his promise. There was no way someone as prideful as him would break a promise that was that clearly about victory or defeat.

My victory had become possible.

Of course, it was most difficult to prevent Daiya, Koudai Kamiuchi and the others from killing someone. When the time limit draws near and the fear of death haunts them, someone might make a mistake. It was a difficult task to reach an end in which nothing happens.

But still, I had to attempt it.

“…Daiya.”

I pointed my index finger at him.

Daiya called the [Kingdom Royale] so far a «meaningless fight to the death».

But I denied that.

There was a meaning. Yuuri-san, Iroha-san and everyone else’s struggling had taught me the way to win against Daiya.

I definitely wouldn’t render everyone’s suffering futile.

“I will win against you, Daiya!”

Daiya grinned confidently and declared,

“Absolutely impossible.”

Author’s Notes

Hello, I’m Eiji Mikage.

«Hakomari~!» (tried making a cute abbreviation) has already reached the third volume. Finally that guy that was a bit suspicious since the first volume has started acting. Since it’s easy to write his character, I awaited this more than anyone!

Okay, I’m a bit unsure if this is going to touch the content a bit.

I got three volumes released from this series by now, but to tell the truth, my manuscripts were rejected quite often until I managed to get this series going.

There were even stories that were completely rejected.

Those rejected works will never see the light of the world. I found those tales interesting myself but they died without ever reaching their readers.

But that’s how it should be.

Of course it was a shock when a story, I spent months to write, was rejected and it was mortifying. But they keep living as the nutrient of me and my works… okay, that might be exaggerated, but anyway, if those rejected works hadn’t existed, this work would not exist now.

However, if I had given up writing, those many rejected works might have really only died in vain.

When I think about it like that, I realize how important it is to not give up and continue. …eh, ain’t I writing too much serious stuff? Ah right, for the readers that have yet to read the book; to explain what this time’s story is about: it’s about a group of six boys and girls staying together overnight playing a game while screaming joyfully. Sounds fun, doesn’t it?

Onto the thank-you note.

Thanks to Tetsuo-san for this time’s lovely illustrations that you drew for me in your tight schedule.

My editor in charge, Kawamoto-san. Thank you very much for everything

until now. I think I could grow thanks to you. If you wish, I'll write a BL at your duty post! …uh, sorry, I just lied. Can't seem to do something like that.

And of course thanks to all my readers. As it's going to be a continuation, I want to release the next volume as fast as possible. It's going to come out in Spring! It will… I think. It should. I hope it will!

See you another time!

- Eiji Mikage

Comments

Eiji Mikage
I live in Saitama. Recently, I drink a cup of coffee, chew a gum, listen to some music through my earphones, meditate and hit my head once before I start working on my manuscript.

Tetsuo
Wow, we already arrived at the third volume.
Years pass by so fast, it’s tough to live.
Also, I think wearing female clothing is a nice thing.

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